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stories & essays

Salman Rushdie, Romila Thapar, Abraham Eraly,
Kalki, Manu S. Pillai, Jadunath Sarkar,
Rajmohan Gandhi, William Dalrymple,
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THE BOOK OF INDIAN KINGS

Stories and Essays

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which it is published.

Help, grace, poise, devotion
Are a mighty king's definition

— TIRUVALLUVAR, *The Tirukkural* ,
Couplet 390

A NOTE ON THE BOOK

In order to preserve the form and flavour of the pieces as they were originally published, the texts have not been standardized according to Aleph's house style. In a couple of the pieces, notes, references, and cross-references have been excised. The epigraph is taken from *The Tirukkural: A New English Version* by Gopalkrishna Gandhi.

CONTENTS

1. ROMILA THAPAR
The Emergence of Empire: Mauryan India

2. ABRAHAM ERALY
The First Hindu Empire

3. KALKI
Raja Raja Chozhar
Translated from the Tamil by C. V. Karthik Narayanan

4. MANU S. PILLAI
Krishnadeva Raya

5. SALMAN RUSHDIE
The Shelter of the World

6. JADUNATH SARKAR
Shivaji and His Times

7. RAJMOHAN GANDHI
Tipu Sultan

8. WILLIAM DALRYMPLE
The Last Mughal

9. KHUSHWANT SINGH
Ranjit Singh, Maharaja of the Punja b

10. VIR SANGHVI AND NAMITA BHANDARE
Madhavrao Scindia

Acknowledgements

ONE

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THE EMERGENCE OF EMPIRE MAURYAN INDIA *

ROMILA THAPAR

At the time of Bindusara's death in c. 272 BC , a large part of the subcontinent had come under Mauryan suzerainty. One area that was hostile, possibly interfering with Mauryan commerce to the peninsula and south India, was Kalinga on the east coast (Orissa). Its conquest was left to Bindusara's son Ashoka, whose campaign in Kalinga was more than just an event of military significance.

Until about a hundred years ago in India, Ashoka was merely one of the many kings mentioned in the Mauryan dynastic list included in the *Puranas* . Elsewhere in the Buddhist tradition he was referred to as a *chakravartin/cakkavatti* , a universal monarch, but this tradition had become extinct in India after the decline of Buddhism. However, in 1837, James Prinsep deciphered an inscription written in the earliest Indian script since the Harappan, *brahmi* . There were many inscriptions in which the King referred to himself as Devanampiya Piyadassi (the beloved of the gods, Piyadassi). The name did not tally with any mentioned in the dynastic lists, although it was mentioned in the Buddhist chronicles of Sri Lanka. Slowly the clues were put together but the final confirmation came in 1915, with the discovery of yet another version of the edicts in which the King calls himself Devanampiya Ashoka.

The edicts of Ashoka, located as inscriptions in various parts of

his empire, acquaint us not only with the personality of the King but also with the events of his reign and above all his policies as a ruler. As statements of his personal concerns they are remarkable documents, vividly capturing the ambience of his time. This allows glimpses of something other than the conventional limitations of official documents. The edicts do in fact 'speak' of his concerns, both as a human being and a statesman. Their almost conversational style brings to life the personality of the King.

The edicts of the earlier half of his reign were inscribed on rock surfaces wherever these were conveniently located, and are therefore referred to as the Minor and Major Rock Edicts. These were distributed widely throughout the empire especially in areas of permanent settlement and concentrations of people. In the latter part of his reign his edicts were inscribed on well-polished sandstone monolithic pillars, each surmounted with a finely sculpted animal capital, and these have come to be known as the Pillar Edicts. The stone was quarried from sites at Chunar near Varanasi and would have involved much technological expertise in cutting and engraving. The Pillar Edicts are confined to the Ganges Plain, probably because they were transported by river. The area coincides with the heartland of the empire.

Ashokan inscriptions continue to be found and there is always anticipation regarding information that a new edict may bring. Even where the text is the same as that of earlier ones, the significance of the location adds to our information on Mauryan history. Translations or versions in Greek or Aramaic of the Ashokan edicts, intended for the Greek- and Aramaic-speaking people on the north-western borders, have been helpful in clarifying the meaning of those Prakrit terms that are ambiguous or controversial. Thus *dhamma* was rendered by some scholars as the teaching of the Buddha and by others as a more general concern for ethical behaviour. Its translation into Greek as *eusebeia* would tend to support the second meaning. There is interestingly no reference to the teachings of the Buddha in the Greek and Aramaic versions. This might have been expected if their intention was to propagate Buddhism. What is equally fascinating is that some concepts in these edicts are drawn from the philosophical discourse in that language. Thus the edicts in Aramaic are better understood if read in the context of some Zoroastrian concepts. At a more mundane level, the Greek version of the Minor Rock Edict clarifies the date as

being in expired regnal years, which is helpful to chronological reconstruction.

Ashoka's experience as an administrator began with his being the governor at Taxila and at Ujjain, both cities handling commercial activities. His sojourn in Taxila is described in texts associated with the later northern Buddhist tradition. These write of his bid for the throne on the deathbed of his father, a bid encouraged by some of the more powerful ministers. His stay at Ujjain is described in the Sri Lankan chronicles of the southern Buddhist tradition. They refer to his love for the beautiful daughter of a merchant, a devout Buddhist and the mother of his son Mahinda who is said to have introduced Buddhism to Sri Lanka.

There continues to be a controversy as to whether Ashoka succeeded his father immediately on the latter's death or whether there was a four-year interregnum involving a struggle for the throne among the brothers. Of the events of Ashoka's reign, the most frequently referred to by modern historians has been his conversion to Buddhism. This was linked to the famous campaign in Kalinga. In about 260 BC Ashoka campaigned against the Kalingans and routed them. Presumably the campaign was to obtain resources from Kalinga; to safeguard the routes of the profitable Mauryan trade with the peninsula that went past the eastern coast; or to chastise the Kalingans for having broken away from Magadhan control, if the canal built by the Nandas was a symbol of control. The destruction caused by the war filled the King with remorse. His earlier perfunctory interest in Buddhist teaching was rekindled and this time it became a central pursuit. It has been stated in the past that he was dramatically converted to Buddhism immediately after the battle, with its attendant horrors. But his was not an overnight conversion; he states in one of his inscriptions that only after a period of two and a half years did he become a zealous devotee of Buddhism. It eventually led him to endorse non-violence and consequently to forswear war as a means of conquest. Yet, curiously, he refrained from engraving his confession of remorse at any location in Kalinga. This was replaced by the Separate Edicts (as they have come to be called), which are instructions to his officers, emphasizing the need for good administration.

Nevertheless his statement on the campaign is indeed extraordinary, coming from a conqueror, setting him apart as a rare human being. He states:

When he had been consecrated eight years the Beloved of the Gods, the king Piyadassi, conquered Kalinga. A hundred and fifty thousand people were deported, a hundred thousand were killed and many times that number perished. Afterwards, now that Kalinga was annexed, the Beloved of the Gods very earnestly practised *Dhamma* , desired *Dhamma* and taught *Dhamma* . On conquering Kalinga the Beloved of the Gods felt remorse, for when an independent country is conquered the slaughter, death and deportation of the people is extremely grievous to the Beloved of the Gods and weighs heavily on his mind. What is even more deplorable to the Beloved of the Gods, is that those who dwell there, whether brahmans, shramans, or those of other sects, or householders who show obedience to their superiors, obedience to mother and father, obedience to their teachers and behave well and devotedly towards their friends, acquaintances, colleagues, relatives, slaves and servants —all suffer violence, murder and separation from their loved ones. Even those who are fortunate to have escaped and whose love is undiminished suffer from the misfortunes of their friends, acquaintances, colleagues and relatives. This participation of all men in suffering weighs heavily on the mind of the Beloved of the Gods.

(Major Rock Edict XIII, tr. R. Thapar)

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* Emperor Ashoka, one of India's most iconic rulers, belonged to the Maurya dynasty. While the precise date of his birth has not been established, it is known that he succeeded his father Bindusara to the throne and ruled until his death in 232 BCE . This extract is taken from *The Penguin History of Early India* .

TWO

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THE FIRST HINDU EMPIRE *

ABRAHAM ERALY

The collapse of the Kushana Empire in the third century CE was followed by a century-long period of political chaos in North India, before the scene changed dramatically with the rise of the imperial Guptas in Bihar in the fourth century. Nothing at all is known about the background of this dynasty. Though there are a few references to officials and others with the surname Gupta in post-Mauryan records, it is uncertain whether these Guptas had any connection with the Gupta dynasty. The Hindu law books assign names ending with the suffix 'Gupta' to Vaisyas, but other *varnas* are also known to have used that suffix. The Puranas speak of the early Guptas contemptuously, as petty kings who were 'barbarous, unrighteous, dishonest, niggardly and highly irascible'. Comments Kosambi: 'The line had no respectable origin as clan, tribe or caste.'

The history of the Gupta dynasty begins with Sri-Gupta, who is described as *adiraja* , the first king, in Gupta inscriptions. It is however doubtful whether he and his successor, Sri Ghatotkacha-Gupta, were anything more than vassal chieftains, for the title Maharaja (Great King) that they sported was commonly used by chieftains in the classical age, while kings used the title Maharajadhiraja (Great King of Kings). The Allahabad pillar inscription of the reign of Samudra-Gupta, the great-grandson of Sri-Gupta, makes a clear distinction between these titles: 'Samudra-

Gupta the Maharajadhiraja, son of the prosperous Chandra-Gupta, the Maharajadhiraja…son of the prosperous Ghatotkacha, the Maharaja, and son of the son's son of the prosperous [Sri] Gupta, the Maharaja.'

Nothing more than their names is known about the first two Guptas. It was Chandra-Gupta I, the third ruler of the line, who catapulted the Guptas from provincial obscurity to subcontinental prominence, and it is from his accession that the Gupta Era beginning with CE 320 is traced. The turning point in the transformation of the Gupta fortunes was Chandra-Gupta's marriage with Kumaradevi, a princess of the ancient and presumably still powerful Lichchavi tribe of the trans-Gangetic plains of north Bihar, adjacent to the Gupta lands in south Bihar. Exactly how the Guptas benefited from the marriage is not clear. Probably the princess was an heiress, and the marriage united the two kingdoms, so the Guptas acquired the critical mass in territory and power that they needed to expand; or it could be that the Lichchavis, a renowned martial tribe, gave the Guptas crucial military assistance; at the least, the marriage would have considerably enhanced the prestige of the upstart Gupta dynasty.

The Lichchavi alliance was so momentous an event in the career of Chandra-Gupta that he struck gold coins in the joint names of himself and Kumaradevi, as if they were co-rulers—his coins bear the image of himself and his queen on the obverse, while the reverse has the image of a goddess riding a lion and the legend 'Lichchavi'. Even Chandra-Gupta's son and successor Samudra-Gupta proudly vaunted his mother's lineage, and described himself in his inscriptions as the 'son of the Lichchavi [princess]…Mahadevi Kumaradevi'.

Chandra-Gupta probably held sway over Magadha (Bihar) and Kosala (eastern Uttar Pradesh), with Pataliputra as his capital, a very large kingdom, but not quite an empire. He reigned for some fifteen years, till about 335, and is said to have abdicated the throne in his old age in favour of Samudra-Gupta, his son by the Lichchavi princess, choosing him from among his several sons. According to the Allahabad inscription, the king, his 'hair standing on end, indicating [his] feeling…overcome with affection, [and] laden with tears [of joy]', ordained Samudra-Gupta, saying, 'Come, oh worthy [one]…protect the whole earth.' This action, says the inscription, gladdened the courtiers, but the other princes 'looked

on with sad faces'.

The Allahabad inscription, a *prasasthi* (panegyric) written by the Gupta court poet Harishena and engraved on an Asoka pillar, is the main source of information on Samudra-Gupta. But how much credibility can we give to the eulogy written by a courtier, and presumably approved by the emperor himself? *Prasasthis* are usually creative versions of truth, involving gross exaggerations and vital omissions, sometimes even outright falsehoods. Typically, the Allahabad *prasasthi* describes Samudra-Gupta as a divine incarnation, 'a mortal only in that he performs the rites, and [conforms] to the conventions of the world, but is [otherwise] a god dwelling on earth.'

These poetic conceits caution us not to give total credence to the statements in the *prasasthi* . It is however probable that its claims, though no doubt vastly exaggerated, are based on real achievements, for the great variety and high quality of the gold coins that Samudra-Gupta issued, and the figures and legends on them, indicate that Samudra-Gupta was indeed a great ruler, and a man of diverse talents, who excelled as much in the field of culture as in the battlefield. Some of his coins show him playing the veena (lute) sitting on a couch, 'wearing a waistcloth, close-fitting cap, necklace, earrings and armlets'. On the reverse of this coin is an image of Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune, seated on a wicker stool, holding a cornucopia.

Samudra-Gupta's portrait on his coins show him as a tall man of robust, muscular physique, and he is often depicted in martial poses, holding a bow and arrow or a battleaxe. One of his coins describes him as 'having the prowess of a tiger', another as 'the unconquered conqueror of unconquered kings', and yet another states that, 'having conquered the earth, the Invincible One wins heaven by good deeds'. Likewise, the Allahabad inscription describes Samudra-Gupta as a military genius of great personal valour, who delighted in the dangerous sport of war and often threw himself into the thick of battle. He 'was skilful in engaging in hundreds of battles of various kinds, whose only allies were his valour and the might of his arm,' says the *prasasthi* . '[His body] was most charming, being covered over with the plenteous beauty of the marks of hundreds of promiscuous scars, caused by battleaxes, arrows, spikes, spears, barbed darts, swords, iron clubs, javelins…barbed arrows…and many other weapons.'

Samudra-Gupta had inherited a large kingdom from his father, and this he expanded into a vast empire. ‘He is without an antagonist on earth,’ claims the *prasasthi* , ‘he, by the overflowing of the multitude of [his] many good qualities, and adorned by hundreds of good actions, has wiped off the fame of other kings with the soles of [his] feet.’ The inscription then goes on to list the numerous kings that Samudra-Gupta claimed to have vanquished. Though this is obviously an inflated list, it is quite likely that he did annex the lands of many kings in the Gangetic Plain—nine kings were there ‘violently uprooted’ by him, says the *prasasthi* . Later, after establishing his sway over North India, he is said to have hacked his way through the forbidding forests of Central India to conquer Kalinga, then advanced into South India, subdued a dozen kings there, and reached as far south as Kanchipuram, where he defeated King Vishnugopa of the Pallava dynasty. So it is claimed.

Samudra-Gupta’s peninsular campaign was for exacting booty and tribute, rather than for conquest—it was like a tidal wave that swept over the land and then quickly subsided, leaving the political landscape largely unchanged. In the peninsula, as in the other remote regions he conquered, his officers were ‘always engaged upon restoring wealth, [titles, territories, etc.] to the many kings conquered by the might of his arms,’ states the *prasasthi* . What Samudra-Gupta sought through these campaigns was to establish his suzerainty, not his direct rule. This policy was quite probably dictated by practical considerations, for the Guptas, unlike the Mauryas, did not have the complex administrative organization needed to rule a vast empire.

Returning to Pataliputra from his southern campaign, Samudra-Gupta performed the *asvamedha-yaga* , the great Vedic horse sacrifice, and issued commemorative gold coins, which depict the sacrificial horse on one side and his chief queen on the other side, and bear the legend, ‘The king of kings, who performed the *asvamedha* sacrifice, having protected the earth, wins heaven.’ We do not know which other campaigns Samudra-Gupta undertook and with what results, for the claims made in the *prasasthi* are vague. It is likely that the kings bordering his empire prudently sent him presents, or maidens for his harem, and these offerings were construed by the panegyrist as acts of homage by tributary kings. Thus, when the king of Sri Lanka, as we learn from Chinese sources, sent presents to the Gupta court as a courtesy and requested the

emperor's permission to build a Buddhist monastery at Gaya close to the imperial capital, that was taken by the Guptas as an act of submission.

Clearly Samudra-Gupta was not as great a monarch as the Allahabad inscription describes him to be. But undeniably he was the dominant monarch of India in his time, and was quite probably acknowledged as such by a good number of Indian kings. However, his empire, though extensive, was small compared to the Mauryan Empire, his direct rule being confined to the Gangetic Plain. Kashmir, Punjab and Sind were outside his domain, and so were most of Rajasthan and the whole of peninsular India except Orissa. And the Sakas were still in possession of Gujarat and Malwa.

But Samudra-Gupta had other claims to fame than his conquests. He was, according to the *prasasthi* , a great scholar, poet and musician. His mind, states the inscription, 'is surcharged with happiness in consequence of his association with the wise… [He] is accustomed to retain the truth and purpose of [any] science… [Furthermore], he enjoys, in the world of the learned, a far-extending sovereignty in consequence of [his] fame for copious lucid poetry… [He] has put to shame Brihaspati (the preceptor of gods) by [his] sharp and polished intellect, as also Tumburu (a musician of gods), Narada (the divine sage-musician) and others by the grace of his musical performances. [He has earned the] title "King of Poets" [by his] many poetic compositions which are fit to serve as the source of inspiration for the learned. And his many wonderful and noble deeds are fit to be praised for a very long time.'

We have to regard all these claims with a good amount of scepticism, for no poetic or scholarly work of Samudra-Gupta is extant, though the works of several other poets of the age are known. It is, however, quite likely that the emperor had a strong affinity for literature and the arts, cultivated them himself, and was a keen and generous patron of culture. He obviously took as much pride in being a poet and musician as in being a conqueror, as is evident from his coins that depict him playing the veena, though here, too, we have to bear in mind that the royal portraits on coins were usually pictorial eulogies.

Samudra-Gupta died around 375, after a reign of about forty years, and was succeeded by a shadowy prince named Rama-Gupta, but he was overthrown by his brother Chandra-Gupta II, the most

renowned of the Gupta emperors. This usurpation is the subject of *Devi-Chandra-Gupta* , a sixth-century Sanskrit play by Visakhadatta. The play now exists only in fragments quoted in other texts, but the story is retold with many embellishments in a later Arabic work, *Mujmal-ut-Tawarikh* .

According to the Arabic text, Rama-Gupta was defeated by the Sakas in battle, and could save his crown only by promising to hand over his queen Dhruvadevi to the Saka monarch. Chandra-Gupta was appalled by this humiliating arrangement, so he disguised himself in the queen's attire, and in the company of several soldiers dressed as her maids, entered the Saka camp, assassinated the king in his bedchamber—'ripped open his belly with a knife'—and saved the Gupta honour. But this compounded the humiliation of Rama-Gupta, so Chandra-Gupta for a while pretended to be mad, to save himself from the venomous envy of his brother. Eventually, however, he assassinated Rama-Gupta, usurped the throne, and took Dhruvadevi as his queen. In broad terms, the incident appears to be factual, for Bana in *Harshacharita* also mentions it: 'The king of the Sakas, while courting another's wife, was butchered by Chandra-Gupta concealed in the dress of his mistress.'

Chandra-Gupta II continued the expansionist policies of his predecessors, and annexed, after a prolonged war, western India from the Sakas, thus ending the several centuries-long Saka rule there. Chandra-Gupta celebrated the victory by issuing commemorative coins, for the conquest of Gujarat was very important to the Guptas, as it considerably enhanced their economic resources by giving them direct access to the flourishing overseas trade with the western world passing through the Gujarat ports.

Later, Chandra-Gupta is believed to have led campaigns into eastern Bengal and north-western India as well. Under him, the Gupta Empire reached its apogee, and stretched over almost the entire Indo-Gangetic Plain, all the way from Bengal to Punjab, and across Central India from the Bay of Bengal to the Arabian Sea. This expansion made it necessary for Chandra-Gupta to maintain a second capital at Ujjain in western Madhya Pradesh, a central position in his vast empire. It is generally held that the military exploits of a king named Chandra engraved on the iron pillar in Delhi refer to the conquests of Chandra-Gupta II. But this is by no means certain, for the inscription bears no date, and does not even

mention the name Gupta.

Chandra-Gupta was as shrewd a diplomat as he was a heroic general. He entered into a number of strategic marriage alliances with several kingdoms, and these were nearly as beneficial to him as were his military campaigns. Giving his daughter Prabhavati-Gupta in marriage to the Vakataka King Rudrasena II of the Deccan proved to be particularly advantageous, for when Rudrasena died soon after the marriage, Prabhavathi became the regent of her infant son and ruled the kingdom for about twenty years, so that the extensive Vakataka kingdom became virtually a part of the Gupta domain.

Chandra-Gupta's early coins show him as a large-headed man with thick curly hair, but a later coin shows him as nearly bald. Some of his coins portray him as a martial hero, slaying a lion, and bear the legend *simha-vikrama* , lion hero, but other coins show him holding a flower and bear the legend *rupakriti* (loosely: artist) , indicating his cultural proclivities. Chandra-Gupta also bore the title Vikramaditya (Sun of Valour), and it is likely that some of the stories about the legendary king of that name celebrated in Sanskrit literature are drawn from his career.

Chandra-Gupta's reign certainly was a period of political stability and economic prosperity in India, and marked the climax of the classical Indian civilization. The Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Fa-Hsien spent a decade in India at this time, more than half of that time in the Gupta Empire itself, and he speaks highly of the prosperity and peacefulness of the land, though he makes no specific reference to the Guptas. According to tradition, the *nava-ratnas* (nine gems) of the classical Indian culture (including Kalidasa) adorned Chandra Gupta's court. In religion, he was an ardent Vaishnavite, and bore the epithet *Parama-bhagavata* (Supreme Devotee of Vishnu), but he extended his patronage to other religions and sects as well.

Chandra-Gupta succeeded by Kumara-Gupta I, his son by Dhruvadevi, and he reigned for nearly forty years, from 415 to 454. Towards the close of his reign the empire was harried by the Huns, a branch of whom was also menacing Europe at this time. Kumara-Gupta managed to hold them back, but the Hun presence in the borderlands of India boded ill for the Guptas. Around this time, a mysterious Deccani people of uncertain name but probably called Pushyamitras—who had, according to a contemporary inscription,

‘great resources in men and money’—also seriously threatened the Gupta imperial authority, but were eventually defeated by a Gupta army under Kumara-Gupta’s son, Skanda-Gupta.

Skanda-Gupta, who succeeded his father, was probably the son of a junior queen or royal concubine—he does not mention his mother’s name even in his own inscription, though he gives the names of the mothers of his three predecessors. He seems to have come to power through a succession struggle, for it is stated in a contemporary record that the ‘goddess of sovereignty, of her own accord, selected him as her husband, having in succession discarded all other princes.’ Whatever were the circumstances of his accession, Skanda-Gupta proved his fitness to rule by his decisive victories over the adversaries of the empire. The Huns again menaced the empire during his reign, but were yet again routed, and they would not trouble the Guptas any more for some decades. The Junagarh Rock inscription of Skanda-Gupta’s reign states with regal vanity that the emperor ‘humbled his enemies and made subject to himself the earth, bounded by the waters of the four oceans and with thriving border countries’ .

Skanda-Gupta was the last great ruler of the Gupta dynasty. By the end of his reign, the Gupta Empire had become militarily exhausted through endless wars. Wars, as well as the decline of trade, also ruined the financial resources of the empire, as is evident from the small number and debased quality of the gold coins issued by Skanda-Gupta. These problems were compounded by internecine clashes. Political conditions grew steadily worse under the latter Guptas, effete rulers incapable of coping with the growing crisis in the empire. As the central authority thus weakened, the empire fragmented, and the effective power of the Guptas became confined to Bihar and Bengal. It was now the age of the warlords, and every petty chieftain strutted about as a Maharaja, even as a Maharajadhiraja.

The later history of the Guptas is very obscure. But they seem to have somehow managed to hold on to their throne for some fifty years after Skanda-Gupta, till the third decade of the sixth century. Even after the collapse of their power, the Gupta royal clan continued to reappear in history now and then, as petty kings or as provincial officials. And we hear of a new Gupta dynasty, of undetermined relationship with the imperial Guptas, ruling over Bihar for about a hundred years from the middle of the seventh

century, and having matrimonial alliances with the kings of Nepal.

The Gupta imperial power lasted for about two hundred years, through the fourth and fifth centuries, and this period is generally reckoned as the golden age of India. Indeed, in many respects it was that. But the cultural efflorescence of the Gupta age was the culmination of a process that had begun several centuries before the Guptas, and was nourished by the economic prosperity that India enjoyed during that period. This prosperity was largely due to thriving trade, internal as well as external, which, growing steadily since the first century BCE , reached its peak during the early Gupta period, because of the political stability and administrative unity that a large part of India enjoyed under the Guptas. There was also a significant expansion of agriculture during the Gupta age, and rural prosperity in turn stimulated trade. The early Guptas were fabulously wealthy, their treasury overflowing with the booty that they had gathered during their many military campaigns. And this wealth enabled them, on the one hand, to keep the taxes low—which encouraged economic enterprise—and, on the other, to maintain a luxurious and cultured court, and to lavishly patronise writers, artists and intellectuals.

Curiously, there is no reference to the Guptas in the literature of this age, and not even Fa-Hsien mentions them. Nor are any of the great monuments of the age attributable to Gupta patronage. And it is only in a late legend that we hear of the nine cultural gems that are said to have adorned the court of Chandra-Gupta II. All this alerts us not to be too carried away by the concept of the Gupta golden age. It was undeniably a period of great cultural achievement, but the role of the Guptas in this seems to be generally exaggerated by historians, perhaps for sentimental reasons, as the Gupta Empire was the last great empire of ancient India, and the first (and only) great Hindu empire in the entire history of India. In any case, the golden age ended before the Gupta Empire ended. The last phase of the Gupta history was marked by political chaos, economic decline, decay of towns, and general regression in culture and standard of life. India then slid into the dark ages, around the same time as Europe did.

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* The Gupta Empire, called the Golden Age of India by some historians,

existed from approximately the middle of the fourth century CE to the middle of the sixth century CE . This extract is taken from *The First Spring* .

THREE

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RAJA RAJA CHOZHAR *

KALKI

Translated from the Tamil by C. V. Karthik Narayanan

Sundara Chozhar's children were all very handsome. The youngest, Arulmozhivarman, surpassed the others. The beauty of his face seemed not just human, but divine. The women of the household used to kiss him so often that his cheeks grew red. But the one who loved him most was his older sister, Kundavai, who, though she was only two years older, felt wholly responsible for him. Arulmozhivarman was equally fond of her. He would do nothing against his sister's wishes, not even if it was a joint request from Brahma, Vishnu and Siva.

The sister used to gaze at his face not only when he was awake, but also when he was asleep. "This boy has some divine power in him. It is my responsibility to draw it out, to make it shine," she would think. She often examined his palms while he slept. It seemed to her that the lines on it were shaped like a conch and a disc. "Aha!" she used to think, 'This boy is destined to rule the world, he will bring the whole world under one umbrella." But there was no way he could ascend the throne. There were two others before him in the line of succession. Where would he find a kingdom to rule? What did the gods have in mind for him? Who knew? The world was vast. There were so many countries, so many kingdoms. Had there not been men who crossed the seas to conquer

kingdoms by the strength of their arms? Didn't the Bengal prince who was driven away from his homeland, escape to Lanka by boat and establish a dynasty there? And hadn't that kingdom been stable for the last thousand years?

Kundavai Devi thought of all this ceaselessly. Eventually, when a discussion was held about who should lead the Chozha forces to Lanka, she decided that it should be Arulmozhi.

"Thambi! Arulmozhi! It hurts me to be separated from you even for a second. But the time has come when I must ask you to leave. You must go to Lanka as the commander of the army," she said.

The Prince accepted enthusiastically. He had been longing to break free from life in the palace, from the protection of the women of the anthappuram. Now, his beloved sister had herself asked him to leave. What was there to stop him?

Once Kundavai made up her mind, there was nothing she could not achieve, since Sundara Chozhar had great affection for his daughter and deep faith in her.

Prince Arulmozhivarman became the commander of the southern forces. He led his army to Lanka and waged war there for a while. The war did not end that quickly, however. The methods that he adopted were different and he did not receive the weapons and material he needed from home. He therefore went back on a visit, talked to his father, arranged matters to his satisfaction and prepared to return.

Kundavai had made plans for auspicious ceremonies to be conducted in the palace at Pazhayarai before sending her beloved brother back to the battlefield. As Arulmozhi stepped into the courtyard, the war drums thundered. Conches sounded. Small drums thudded. Cries of victory rose to the sky.

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* Raja Raja Chola belonged to the Chola dynasty of Southern India. He is believed to have been born around 947 CE and died in 1014 CE . This extract is taken from *The First Floods* .

FOUR

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KRISHNADEVA RAYA *

MANU S. PILLAI

A little before the end of his reign in 1509, Vira Narasimha Raya of Vijayanagara summoned his minister to his chamber and entrusted him with a mission of grave importance. The king was dying and his sons were very young. The greatest threat to their future, he knew, was his ambitious half-brother, and to safeguard his children, it was essential that their chief rival was defanged sooner than later. Blinding was proposed, and the minister pledged to carry out the odious task—when he returned to the Raya's side sometime later, it was with a bloody pair of eyes to show as evidence of the deed having been done. The satisfied king heaved a sigh of relief and soon passed away. In his mind he was at peace, for the prospects of his royal children were now secured.

But it was all treachery. The minister was fond of the dead Raya's brother, in whom he saw marks of leadership and prospective greatness. Even as he produced goat's eyes to deceive the dying king, he had actually hidden away his rival in a place of security. And now with the Raya gone, it was time for the prince to return, so he—and not the late king's children—could be crowned and become emperor. It was Krishna Raya—popularly known as Krishnadeva Raya—who would sit on the Lion Throne of Vijayanagara; all his rivals, meanwhile, were parcelled off to a faraway fortress where they would languish for years.

Krishna Raya was a man of phenomenal ability but was also,

unfortunately, impaired at first by dubious legitimacy. His mother, as it is said, was lowborn, and he had never been his brother's equal. Legend has it that their father, Narasa Nayaka, one day beheld magic in the skies—something that might have been a shooting star. He consulted his astrologers at once who opined that the hour was apposite to produce an heir of uncommon capacity. But Narasa Nayaka did not have his wife nearby, so it was a lamp-cleaner, Nagi—or Nagamba—who went to her master's bedchamber. Nine months later, she presented him a son, the future Krishna Raya.

The tale is apocryphal, as may well be the story of the goat's eyes, but somewhere behind talks of stars and heavenly totems lies concealed the fact of Krishna Raya's problematic provenance. But he was lucky in one regard—when he snatched the throne in 1509, legitimacy was hardly the most important ingredient in shoring up power. After all, his father was only regent to the sons of a previous emperor—those sons conveniently died, and Narasa Nayaka's own issue declared themselves rulers. That previous emperor, in turn, had gained royal status only by force—the last of the Sangamas, who founded Vijayanagara a century before, were preoccupied, son killing father, brother killing brother, and it was through a coup in 1485 that he too had seized power.

But the turmoil of uncertainty was still felt strongly, and the empire was in doldrums. There were threats in the north from assorted Sultans and the king of Orissa, while nearer home grimaced chieftains whose loyalties to their upstart rulers was tenuous at best. For the inaugural years of his reign, therefore, Krishna Raya was constantly at war—he marched to Kanchi to quash rebellion and laid siege to Sivasamudram. He led troops to Srirangapatana, just as he descended on Ikkeri. He even fought the Persian-born Sultan of Bijapur, whom he called Edula Khan, * killing him in the field. Or more graphically, as the scholar G. Srinivas Reddy translates, he 'crushed the skulls of Khurasani warriors like melons and built a gruesome effigy' with the Sultan's 'decapitated head'.

Krishna Raya was a man marked by majesty and splendour, and quickly order was restored to his empire. Some would deem him an incarnation of Vishnu, while royal inscriptions were even more flamboyant. 'Overcome by his glory,' we are told, 'the sun sinks into the western ocean as if unable to endure the distress of mind. As if

fearing that the seven oceans would provide a refuge to his enemies, they were dried up by the clouds of dust raised by the earth, trampled to pieces by his horsemen.' Clouds of dust were certainly raised, for as a subsequent Portuguese chronicler raved, when 'Crisnao Rao of Bisnaga' entered the field, his armies 'covered the plains and hills and stopped the flow of rivers'. About 700,000 soldiers raised swords for him, added to which was 'baggage in such quantities that courtesans alone numbered more than twenty thousand'.

In the age of the Sangamas, under Deva Raya II (r. 1425–46), Vijayanagara had become one of the great cities of the world. A man of military prowess, he was also a patron of the arts. Tribute came to the emperor from Sri Lanka, just as magnates of the Malabar coast acquiesced to Vijayanagara's supremacy in his day. At court he entertained Sanskrit scholars even as he parleyed with a Christian. He supported the celebrated poet Srinatha, just as he interrogated foreign visitors about lands and great cities overseas. Diamonds and rubies were sold in open markets in the streets, and the empire's commercial networks stretched both across the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea. Indeed, so magnificent was Deva Raya's reign that to a dazzled Persian envoy there were 'no equals in the world' to the inhabitants of Vijayanagara.

Deva Raya's reign was the zenith of Sangama achievement, but soon after his demise, the empire slid into decline. Now it was for Krishna Raya to resurrect Vijayanagara, a challenge in which he so splendidly succeeded that by the end of his reign nearly half a million people lived in his capital and its immediate hinterland, making it 'second only to Beijing'. The city was, to repeat a cliché, a melting pot of cultures. Krishna Raya himself was Tuluva, from coastal Karnataka, who authored at least five works in Sanskrit, while celebrating Telugu as his court language. In one of his poems, in fact, Telugu is flattered as 'one of a kind' and 'the best' among all regional languages. It may have been that Krishna Raya genuinely loved Telugu. But it could also be that exalting the language was another means for a king of mixed origins to win legitimacy in a primarily Telugu imperial order.

Krishna Raya was equally receptive to international influences. On his visits to Tirupati, the emperor heaped before the deity great riches: a crown with *navaratnas* (nine sacred gems), or 30,000 *varahas* of gold for instance. But he also presented to the temple an

arresting bronze image of himself and his principal wives, reflecting the multiple inspirations thriving in Vijayanagara. The queens are Tirumala Devi (his chief wife) and Chinna Devi (his principal love, said to have been a courtesan elevated to royal status). But the king himself appears in a costume that flaunts a conspicuously 'foreign' element—while around the waist he wears a typical Indian *dhoti* , on his head is a conical hat, resembling the Turkish fez. * Yet another source of cultural innovation may have been the emperor's third wife—daughter of the king of Orissa, who was originally a trophy of war. By all accounts, she did not get along with her husband, but she did bring with her an Odiya entourage, one that presumably lent its own influence to Vijayanagara—a capital city where, alongside Tamil styles, the architecture bore a strong Persian stamp as well.

It is hardly surprising that far from inward-looking orthodoxy, Krishna Raya sat at the helm of a heterodox empire straddling vast lands and trading with many countries. He sought out the Portuguese, for example. In one instance, they were led by a Cristovao de Figueiredo who the emperor so appreciated for his military support that he was formally decorated in court with robes of silk and treated with conspicuous respect. But he also knew that European traders had strategic value to the empire's long term interests. 'Merchants from distant lands who import elephants and warhorses,' we read in Krishna Raya's own words, 'should be kept in imperial service'. They were to be treated 'with prestige' and provided houses to live in and towns to build. 'Purchase their goods at a high price,' advised the king, 'and ensure that your enemies are deprived of such resources.'

'The king,' wrote the traveller Domingos Paes, 'is of medium height and of fair complexion and good figure, rather fat than thin; he has on his face signs of smallpox…He is a great ruler and a man of much justice, but subject to sudden fits of rage.' Every morning, we are told, he drank a three-quarter pint of sesame oil, after which he 'anoints himself all over with the same oil; he covers his loins with a small cloth, and takes in his arms great weights made of earthenware, and then, taking a sword, he exercises himself with it till he has sweated out all the oil, and then he wrestles with one of his wrestlers'. Then came his daily ride, all of which was completed before daybreak. When it was time to appear in court, Krishna Raya threw on a tunic embroidered with 'many roses in gold', a brocade

cap ‘like a Galician helmet’, and then, sat down in state (with the little detail that he remained barefoot). And surrounding him were not only his Brahmins and eunuchs (another concept borrowed from Islamic courts), but also that old minister who had once saved Krishna Raya’s life with a pair of goat’s eyes.

As a warrior-king, Krishna Raya was formidable, and as his victories mounted, so did his pride and confidence swell to colossal proportions. The Raichur *doab* , for instance, had been a bone of contention between rival powers in the area for centuries. Exquisitely fecund but also rich in iron and diamond deposits, this triangular district between the Krishna and Tungabhadra rivers was alternately held by Vijayanagara and its rival sultans to the north. In 1520, the *doab* was in the grip of Ismail Adil Shah—son of the same ‘Edula Khan’ whose head Krishna Raya had impaled on his spear. After his successes against Orissa between 1515–17, it was to Raichur that the Raya turned his attention, and promptly he gathered his troops and attacked the fort.

Unfortunately for Krishna Raya, he did not possess artillery to smash the sturdy old walls of Raichur. But ever resourceful, and with his mind perfectly equipped to seek simple answers to complicated problems, he deployed men with pickaxes and crowbars to start breaking through the walls in the most primitive fashion (the workers were evidently paid on the basis of the number of stones they dislodged from the fort walls). It was while this siege was slowly underway that news arrived that the Adil Shah himself had come to do battle with Krishna Raya from his capital in Bijapur. As a chronicler put it, ‘Crisnarao, without even telling anyone, ordered to saddle a horse, and he rode at full speed’ towards Ismail’s army, which had just crossed the Krishna river.

The battle on 19 May was a spectacular debacle for the Adil Shah. Confident that victory would be his, Ismail had forded the river with 18,000 cavalry, 120,000 infantry, and not less than 150 elephants. Impressive as these numbers were, the fact was that they were still inferior to the forces Krishna Raya could mobilise. What gave Ismail his sense of certainty, then, was not his regular troops but the fact that he possessed 900 guns, small and heavy. It was a smart calculation, generally speaking, but the Adil Shah had forgotten a critical detail. Even as he misguidedly arrayed his guns in a single line, he forgot to factor in the time it would take his men to load and reload the machines—in the end their bovine slowness

let him down, and when Krishna Raya's 27,000 horsemen advanced like the wind to cut down the sultan's horrified soldiers, hell showed itself on earth in an ocean of blood.

The sultan's retreat was disastrous, the Adil Shah losing even more troops as they drowned in the river. The emperor meanwhile returned to the siege of Raichur with his men and a band of 20 Portuguese snipers. Before they knew it, the defenders were picked off one by one from the fort walls, and on 14 June, when the garrison's commander decided to stick his head out from one of the embrasures, he was rewarded instantly with a shot through the head. With that the siege came to a close and the Adil Shah's troops inside surrendered the keys of the fort to the emperor. In a structure that was built by the ancient Kakatiya dynasty, and which sultanate era rulers had strengthened, Krishna Raya now triumphantly added a northern gateway, with aesthetic and stylistic elements borrowed from the south, and celebrating scenes from the great Hindu epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana.

'In the presence of ambassadors,' the Raya would sagely advise one day, 'never use harsh language, for there may come a time for reconciliation.' Chastened and depressed, it was precisely such reconciliation that the Adil Shah was banking on now when he despatched an ambassador to Vijayanagara to ask for the return of his territory and his guns, which too had fallen into Krishna Raya's hands. But the emperor decided he wanted to have a bit of fun. The Bijapuri envoy was first kept waiting endlessly, and when at last an audience was granted, the Raya laid before the man a single simple condition on which everything hinged: he would return Ismail his lands and guns, if and only if, the Adil Shah came to Vijayanagara and kissed its emperor's foot!

It was, in Richard Eaton's words, 'an extraordinary round of diplomacy' that followed, but Krishna Raya's demand itself was not surprising. In 1513, for instance, when he defeated the uncle of the Gajapati of Orissa, the battle had been long and frustrating. Furious, the Raya had declared loudly 'not to bathe that day until he had stamped on his opponent's head'. It was a vow that sent a chill down the enemy's spine, for when kings made such pronouncements, it was a sign that they would now leave no stone unturned to succeed. Wisely, therefore, the Gajapati's uncle decided to sue for peace—he sent Krishna Raya his crown, to substitute for his head, and it was only after stepping on this that the emperor

bathed. The battle had come to an end with victory for Vijayanagara—and a shower for its king.

The episode may have resonated, because Ismail knew that refusing to kiss the emperor's foot could come at a severe cost. Instead, therefore, he asked his ambassador to prevaricate. The sultan, the latter reported, was more than happy to kiss Krishna Raya's royal feet. But sadly, as a sovereign ruler, he could not set foot in foreign territory. In other words, he could not come to Vijayanagara to perform the deed, though the deed itself was not to him objectionable. It was a silly excuse, and predictably, did not convince Krishna Raya—ever mischievous, he now proposed to go to Bijapur and present his foot directly so that the Adil Shah might kiss it. Even as Ismail fled his capital, Vijayanagara's troops surrounded it. And not finding the sultan there, the city was left 'almost in ruins'. As Krishna Raya boasted in his poetry, he had 'led a stampede of ferocious elephants against the Yavana (Muslim) king, toppling his shining jeweled mansions that rise to kiss the sky'. *

It was a strange twist in the saga between Vijayanagara and the northern Deccan's sultanates. But the story was not yet over. In 1523, Krishna Raya led another campaign into the region, and this time he made for Gulbarga, the capital of the Bahmani Sultans of yore. The Bahmanis had established power in the region at the same time that the Sangamas founded Vijayanagara. And while coups in the south led to the rise of Krishna Raya's family, in the north the Bahmani state had split—the Adil Shah's was one of five successor principalities born from the ruins of the old empire. But there was still a titular Bahmani sovereign to whom lip service was paid. Now arriving in the capital of this cipher, Krishna Raya crowned the latter by his own hand. This sultan was the legitimate ruler of the northern Deccan, he declared, and to commemorate the event, the emperor assumed another title: Yavana Rajya Sthapana Acharya—the Hindu monarch who reestablished the kingdom of the Muslims.

But Krishna Raya was not all sword and no principle. In his *Amuktamalyada* , described as one of the five greatest *kavya* works in Telugu, much is the advice he gives on matters of state and kingship. The work, as G. Srinivas Reddy explains, is primarily a celebration of the Tamil bhakti saint Andal and her devotion to Vishnu, while also serving to anchor firmly Krishna Raya's own

Vaishnava leanings—the Sangamas who founded Vijayanagara were Shaivites, and now we find the court shifting to the other side. Nourished by both Tamil tradition and Sanskrit, the *Amuktamalyada* is a poem of a high order. When Andal—or Goda as she is called here—approaches youth, for instance, Krishna Raya writes :

As her beauty matured
She watched the world with half-open eyes.
She grew quiet, reserved, her eyebrows darkened,
And she frowned at playing with childish dolls.

The palms of her hands and the soles of her feet
Turned beautifully pink, and her hair grew long and curly.
Her waist became thin and her breasts grew full,
Pushing away her childhood.

And though the others didn't notice these changes,
She grew aware of her body.
And in this way, day by day, her childhood slipped away.

But before he launches into the poem itself, there is praise for his dynasty alongside a detailed exposition of his kingly philosophy. Though much of this *vamsa-stuti* is plagiarized from his court poet Allasani Peddanna (and the emperor had eight celebrated poets in his court), there is yet a certain clarity which distinguishes Krishna Raya's own contribution. For instance:

A king should care for the empire like his own body
For the two are one.
He should consult physicians, as he does ministers,
And cut back on feasting, as well as taxes.
He should strengthen his muscles and reduce his fat,
Knowing the parts of his body like the wealth in his land.
He should be oiled, massaged and bathed clean
As if crushing and eliminating his enemies.
He should maintain a good complexion and care for his teeth
Like a well-ordered society headed by brahmans.
The king should never forget to keep good health,
For affecting his body affects the empire.

Elsewhere we read again:

A king must tolerate
The boastful talk of his heroes ,
Even though he himself is a great hero,
For that will make his men happy.

Isn't it the king's duty
To see to it that his own heroism
Is reflected in his lords?

Everything of relevance is encapsulated in the *Amuktamalyada* : the daily routine of an ideal king, the dress and ornaments suited to a prince, and when it is wise to show strength and when it is better to offer diplomacy. 'If the enemy has a powerful army,' we learn, 'it is wise to treat him with gifts and respect.' But if 'the reports of spies reveal that the enemy is weak, do not retreat, for it is best to surround him'. The chief enemies in Krishna Raya's mind were the Gajapati of Orissa (a Hindu) and the Sultans of the Deccan (Muslims, albeit with much Hindu blood in their veins—a Bahmani Sultan had even married a Vijayanagara princess once). But these were strategic rivalries: religion itself did not guide the emperor's political attitudes and choices, even if, typically, the politics of the day expressed itself in the vocabulary of faith. That is why rulers of Vijayanagara saw no contradiction in calling themselves 'Hinduraya Suratrana' or Hindu Sultans—they were self-consciously Hindus, but equally revelled in the Islamic title of Sultan.

Indeed, where we do encounter the emperor's patronage of religion, we discover a mixture of devotion and political common sense. Krishna Raya was, for instance, a promoter of *mathas* (monasteries) under Madhva Brahmins. These were established in old temples in rebellious or newly conquered territory—so, for instance, after rebellion in Kanchi in 1511, Krishna Raya donated a village there to the sage Vyasatirtha, while after snatching Raichur from the Adil Shah, the same man received another grant for establishing a *matha* there. These *mathas* not only linked themselves to existing social networks and tapped into their local soft power, winning legitimacy for the king, but their activities also gave a boost to economic transactions—they became, to quote Valerie

Stoker, ‘unofficial outposts of the empire’, creating new structures of patronage in old places, and entrenching the emperor in the everyday reality of diverse local peoples.

But like all remarkable stories, Krishna Raya’s too ultimately came to an end. By 1529, for all his successes in the field and as an emperor, and despite the heights of literary greatness he scaled as a *kavi-raja,* or a poet-king, he was handicapped by want of a male heir. He had daughters, but none of his sons would survive. Two died untimely deaths well before their illustrious father, while the third was too young to be enthroned when Krishna Raya went into decline. It was a strange repetition of his own ascent to power back in the day—a situation where again there was a dying emperor worried about the future of his issue. And in the end, Krishna Raya’s successor too would not be one of his offspring but somebody he had placed under arrest all those years ago when he took the throne. Indeed, even the story of the goat’s eyes returned to haunt the Raya: in the 1520s after he suddenly lost a boy, suspicion fell upon the same minister who saved the king in 1509. And in a fit of fury, Krishna Raya, it is said, chose for the old man a particularly sadistic punishment—he had his eyes gouged out.

Note: The author is grateful to the scholar G. Srinivas Reddy for his exquisite translation of Krishna Raya’s *Amuktamalyada* .

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* Krishnadeva Raya was an emperor of the Vijayanagara empire. He ruled from 1509–29 CE .

* Edula Khan appears in Krishna Raya's *Amuktamalyada* and is a corruption of Adil Khan, from which the future title Adil Shah was derived. Other sources suggest Yusuf Adil Khan died in 1510–11 but given Krishna Raya's pointed claim of having impaled his head on a spear, it is likely that this is indeed how the first Sultan of Bijapur met with his end.

* The Vijayanagara period Lepakshi murals also show several figures wearing similar caps, with two hanging strands. To some, Krishna Raya is wearing a *kireetam* or crown in bronze, but this seems unlikely given the conspicuous absence of ornamentation and gems, which are typical characteristics of *kireetams* .

* Yavana, a Sanskrit derivation of Ionian, was used for the Greeks first, but soon came to be applied to all foreigners, and for Muslims and Turks as well, and subsequently for European colonial powers.

FIVE

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THE SHELTER OF THE WORLD *

SALMAN RUSHDIE

At dawn the haunting sandstone palaces of the new "victory city" of Akbar the Great looked as if they were made of red smoke. Most cities start giving the impression of being eternal almost as soon as they are born, but Sikri would always look like a mirage. As the sun rose to its zenith, the great bludgeon of the day's heat pounded the flagstones, deafening human ears to all sounds, making the air quiver like a frightened blackbuck, and weakening the border between sanity and delirium, between what was fanciful and what was real.

Even the Emperor succumbed to fantasy. Queens floated within his palaces like ghosts, Rajput and Turkish sultanas playing catch-me-if-you-can. One of these royal personages did not really exist. She was an imaginary wife, dreamed up by Akbar in the way that lonely children dream up imaginary friends, and in spite of the presence of many living, if floating, consorts, the Emperor was of the opinion that it was the real queens who were the phantoms and the nonexistent beloved who was real. He gave her a name, Jodha, and no man dared gainsay him. Within the privacy of the women's quarters, within the silken corridors of her palace, Jodha's influence and power grew. The great musician Tansen wrote songs for her, and Master Abdus Samad the Persian portrayed her himself, painted her from the memory of a dream without ever looking upon her face, and when the Emperor saw his work he clapped his hands at

the beauty shining up from the page. “You have captured her, to the life,” he cried, and Abdus Samad relaxed and stopped feeling as if his head were too loosely attached to his neck; and, after this visionary work by the master of the Emperor’s atelier had been exhibited, the whole court knew Jodha to be real, and the greatest courtiers, the *Navratna,* or Nine Jewels, all acknowledged not only her existence but also her beauty, her wisdom, the grace of her movements, and the softness of her voice. Akbar and Jodhabai! Ah, ah! It was the love story of the age.

The city was finished at last, in time for the Emperor’s fortieth birthday. It had been twelve long, hot years in the making, but for a while he had been given the impression that it rose up effortlessly, year by year, as if by sorcery. The Emperor’s minister of works had not allowed any construction to go forward during the Emperor’s sojourns in the new imperial capital. When the Emperor was in residence, the stonemasons’ tools fell silent, the carpenters drove in no nails, the painters, the inlay workers, the hangers of fabrics, and the carvers of screens all disappeared from view. All then, it’s said, was cushioned pleasure. Only noises of delight were permitted to be heard. The bells on the ankles of dancers echoed sweetly, and fountains tinkled, and the soft music of the genius Tansen hung upon the breeze. There was whispered poetry in the Emperor’s ear, and in the pachisi courtyard on Thursdays there was much languid play, with slave girls being used as living pieces on the checkerboard floor. In the curtained afternoons, beneath the sliding punkahs, there was a quiet time for love.

No city is all palaces. The real city, built of wood and mud and dung and brick as well as stone, huddled beneath the walls of the mighty red-stone plinth upon which the royal residences stood. Its neighborhoods were determined by race as well as by trade. Here was the silversmiths’ street, there the hot-gated, clanging armories, and there, down that third gully, the place of bangles and clothes. To the east was the Hindu colony, and beyond that, curling around the city walls, the Persian quarter, and beyond that the region of the Turanis, and beyond that, in the vicinity of the giant gate of the Friday Mosque, the homes of those Muslims who were Indian born. Dotted around the countryside were the villas of the nobles, the art-studio-and-scriptorium whose fame had already spread throughout the land, and a pavilion of music, and another for the performance of dances. In most of these lower Sikris, there was little time for

indolence, and when the Emperor came home from the wars the command of silence felt, in the mud city, like a suffocation. Chickens had to be gagged at the moment of their slaughter for fear of disturbing the repose of the king of kings. A cart wheel that squeaked could earn the cart's driver the lash, and if he cried out under the whip the penalty could be even more severe. Women giving birth withheld their cries, and the dumb show of the marketplace was a kind of madness. "When the King is here, we are all made mad," the people said, adding, hastily, for there were spies and traitors everywhere, "for joy." The mud city loved its Emperor, it insisted that it did, insisted without words, for words were made of that forbidden fabric, sound. When the Emperor set forth once more on his campaigns—his never-ending (though always victorious) battles against the armies of Gujarat and Rajasthan, of Kabul and Kashmir—then the prison of silence was unlocked, and trumpets burst out, and cheers, and people were finally able to tell one another everything they had been obliged to keep unsaid for months on end: *I love you. My mother is dead. Your soup tastes good. If you do not pay me the money you owe me , I will break your arms at the elbows. My darling, I love you, too.* Everything.

Fortunately for the mud city, military matters often took Akbar away. In fact, he had been away most of the time, and in his absences the din of the clustered poor, as well as the racket of the unleashed construction workers, daily vexed the impotent queens. The queens lay together and moaned, and what they did to distract one another, what entertainment they found in one another in their veiled quarters, will not be described here. Only the imaginary queen remained pure, and it was she who told Akbar of the privations the people were suffering because of the desire of overzealous officials to ease his time at home. As soon as the Emperor learned this, he countermanded the order, replaced the minister of works with a less dour individual, and insisted on riding through the streets of his oppressed subjects crying out, "Make as much racket as you like, people! Noise is life, and an excess of noise is a sign that life is good. There will be time for us all to be quiet when we are safely dead." The city burst into joyful clamor.

That was the day on which it became clear that a new kind of king was on the throne, and that nothing in the world would remain the same.

The country was at peace at last, but the King's spirit was never

calm. The King had just returned from his last campaign; he had slapped down the upstart in Surat, but through the long days of marching and war his mind wrestled with philosophical and linguistic conundrums as much as with military ones. The Emperor Abul-Fath Jalaluddin Muhammad, King of Kings, known since his childhood as Akbar, meaning "the great," and latterly, in spite of the tautology of it, as Akbar the Great, the great great one, great in his greatness, doubly great, so great that the repetition in his title was not only appropriate but necessary in order to express the gloriousness of his glory—the Grand Mughal, the dusty, battle-weary, victorious, pensive, incipiently overweight, disenchanted, mustachioed, poetic, over-sexed, and absolute emperor, who seemed altogether too magnificent, too world-encompassing, and, in sum, too *much* to be a single human personage—this all-engulfing flood of a ruler, this swallower of worlds, this many-headed monster who referred to himself in the first-person plural—had begun to meditate, during his long, tedious journey home, on which he was accompanied by the heads of his defeated enemies bobbing in their sealed earthen pickle jars, about the disturbing possibilities of the first-person singular—the "I."

He, Akbar, had never referred to himself as "I," not even in private, not even in anger or dreams. He was—what else could he be?—"we." He was the definition, the incarnation of, the We. He had been born into plurality. When he said "we," he naturally and truly meant himself as an incarnation of all his subjects, of all his cities and lands and rivers and mountains and lakes, as well as all the animals and plants and trees within his frontiers, and also the birds that flew overhead and the mordant twilight mosquitoes and the nameless monsters in their underworld lairs, gnawing slowly at the roots of things; he meant himself as the sum total of all his victories, himself as containing the characters, the abilities, the histories, perhaps even the souls of his decapitated or merely pacified opponents; and, in addition, he meant himself as the apogee of his people's past and present, and the engine of their future.

This "we" was what it meant to be a king—but commoners, he now allowed himself to consider, in the interest of fairness, and for the purposes of debate, no doubt occasionally thought of themselves as plural, too.

Were they wrong? Or (O traitorous thought!) was he? Perhaps

this idea of self-as-community was what it meant to be a being in the world, any being; such a being being, after all, inevitably a being among other beings, a part of the beingness of all things. Perhaps plurality was not exclusively a king's prerogative, perhaps it was not, after all, his divine right. One might further argue that, since the reflections of a monarch were, in less exalted and refined form, doubtless mirrored in the cogitations of his subjects, it was accordingly inevitable that the men and women over whom he ruled should also conceive of themselves as "we"s. They saw themselves, perhaps, as plural entities made up of themselves plus their children, mothers, aunts, employers, co-worshippers, fellow-workers, clans, and friends. They, too, saw their selves as multiple, one self that was the father of their children, another that was their parents' child; they knew themselves to be different with their employers than they were at home with their wives—in short, they were all bags of selves, bursting with plurality, just as he was. Was there then no essential difference between the ruler and the ruled? And now his original question reasserted itself in a new and startling form: if his many-selved subjects managed to think of themselves in the singular rather than the plural, could he, too, be an "I"? Could there be an "I" that was simply oneself? Were there such naked, solitary "I"s buried beneath the overcrowded "we"s of the earth? It was a question that frightened him as he rode his white horse home, fearless, unvanquished, and, it must be conceded, beginning to be fat; and when it popped into his head at night he did not easily sleep. What should he say when he saw his Jodha again? If he were to say simply, "I'm back," or "It is I," might she, in return, feel able to call him by that second-person singular, that *tu* which was reserved for children, lovers, and gods? And what would that mean? That he was like her child, or godlike, or simply the lover of whom she, too, had dreamed, whom she had dreamed into being as eagerly as he had dreamed her? Might that little word, that *tu* , turn out to be the most arousing word in the language? "I," he practiced under his breath. *Here "I" am. "I" love you. Come to "me."*

One final military engagement disturbed his contemplation on the homeward road. One more upstart princeling to slap down. A diversion into the Kathiawar Peninsula to quell the obstinate Rana of Cooch Naheen, a young man with a big mouth and a bigger mustache (the Emperor was vain about his own mustache, and took

unkindly to competitors), a feudal ruler absurdly fond of talking about freedom. Freedom for whom, and from what, the Emperor harrumphed inwardly. Freedom was a children's fantasy, a game for women to play.

No man was ever free. His army moved through the white trees of the Gir Forest like a silently approaching plague, and the pathetic little fortress of Cooch Naheen, seeing the advent of death in the rustling treetops, broke its own towers, ran up a flag of surrender, and begged abjectly for mercy. Often, instead of executing his vanquished opponents, the Emperor would marry one of their daughters and give his defeated father-in-law a job: better a new family member than a rotting corpse. This time, however, he had irritably torn the insolent Rana's mustache off his handsome face, and chopped the weakling dreamer into garish pieces—had done so personally, with his own sword, just as his grandfather would have, and had then retreated to his quarters to tremble and mourn.

The Emperor's eyes were slanted and large and gazed upon infinity as a dreamy young lady might, or a sailor in search of land. His lips were full and pushed forward in a womanly pout. But in spite of these girlish accents he was a mighty specimen of a man, huge and strong. As a boy, he had killed a tigress with his bare hands and then, driven to distraction by his deed, had forever forsworn the eating of meat and become a vegetarian. A Muslim vegetarian, a warrior who wanted only peace, a philosopher-king: a contradiction in terms. Such was the greatest ruler the land had ever known.

In the melancholy after battle, as evening fell upon the empty dead, below the broken fortress melting into blood, within earshot of a little waterfall's nightingale song—*bul-bul* , *bul-bul,* it sang—the Emperor in his brocade tent sipped watered wine and lamented his gory genealogy. He did not want to be like his bloodthirsty ancestors, even though his ancestors were the greatest men in history. He felt burdened by the names of the marauder past, the names from which his name descended in cascades of human blood: his grandfather Babar, the warlord of Ferghana, who had conquered, but always loathed, this new dominion, this India of too much wealth and too many gods, Babar the battle machine, with an unexpected gift for felicitous words; and before Babar the murderous princes of Transoxiana and Mongolia, and mighty Temüjin above all—Genghis, Changez, Jenghis, or Chinggis Qan—

thanks to whom he, Akbar, had to accept the name of *Mughal* , had to be the *Mongol* he was not, or did not feel himself to be. He felt . . . *Hindustani* . His horde was neither Golden, Blue, nor White. The very word "horde" struck his subtle ears as ugly, swinish, coarse. He did not want hordes. He did not want to pour molten silver into the eyes of his vanquished foes or crush them to death beneath the platform upon which he was eating his dinner. He was tired of war.

He remembered the tutor of his childhood, a Persian Mir, telling him that for a man to be at peace with himself he must be at peace with all others. *Sulh-i-kul* , complete peace. No Khan could understand such an idea. He did not want a Khanate. He wanted a country.

The Rana of Cooch Naheen, young, slender, and dark, had knelt at Akbar's feet, his face hairless and bleeding, waiting for the blow to fall. "History repeats itself," he said. "Your grandfather killed my grandfather seventy years ago."

"Our grandfather," replied the Emperor, employing the royal plural according to custom, for this was not the time for his experiment with the singular—this wretch did not merit the privilege of witnessing it—"was a barbarian with a poet's tongue. We, by contrast, are a poet with a barbarian's history and a barbarian's prowess in war, which we detest. Thus it is demonstrated that history does not repeat itself but moves forward, and that Man is capable of change."

"That is a strange remark for an executioner to make," the young Rana said softly. "But it is futile to argue with Death."

"Your time has come," the Emperor assented. "So tell us truthfully before you go, what sort of paradise do you expect to discover when you have passed through the veil?" The Rana raised his mutilated face and looked the Emperor in the eye. "In Paradise, the words 'worship' and 'argument' mean the same thing," he declared. "The Almighty is not a tyrant. In the house of God, all voices are free to speak as they choose, and that is the form of their devotion." He was an irritating, holier-than-thou type of youth, that was beyond question, but in spite of his annoyance Akbar was moved. "We promise you that we will build that house of adoration here on earth," the Emperor said. Then, with a cry—*Allahu Akbar* —"God is great," or, just possibly, "Akbar is God"—he chopped off the pompous little twerp's cheeky, didactic, and therefore suddenly unnecessary head.

In the hours after he killed the Rana, the Emperor was possessed by his familiar demon of loneliness. Whenever a man spoke to him as an equal, it drove him crazy, and this was a fault, he understood that. A king's anger was always a fault; an angry king was like a god who made mistakes. And here was another contradiction in him. He was not only a barbarian philosopher and a crybaby killer but also an egotist addicted to obsequiousness and sycophancy who nevertheless longed for a different world, a world in which he could find exactly that man who was his equal, whom he could meet as his brother, with whom he could speak freely, teaching and learning, giving and receiving pleasure, a world in which he could forsake the gloating satisfactions of conquest for the gentler yet more taxing joys of discourse. Did such a world exist? By what road could it be reached? Was there such a man anywhere in the world, or had he just executed him? What if the Rana of the mustache had been the only one? Had he just slain the only man on earth whom he might have loved? The Emperor's thoughts grew vinous and sentimental, his eyes blurring with drunken tears. How could he become the man he wanted to be? The *akbar* , the great one? How?

There was nobody to talk to. He had ordered his stone-deaf body servant, Bhakti Ram Jain, away, out of his tent, so that he could drink in peace. A body servant who could not hear his master's ramblings was a blessing, but Bhakti Ram Jain had learned to read his lips now, which undid much of his value, making him an eavesdropper like everyone else. *The king is mad.* They said that: everyone said that. His soldiers his people his wives. Probably Bhakti Ram Jain said so as well. They did not say it to his face, for he was a giant of a man and a puissant warrior, like a hero out of the ancient tales, and he was also the king of kings, and if such a one wished to be a little nutty then who were they to argue? The King, however, was not mad. The King was not content with being. He was striving to become.

Very well. He would keep his promise to the dead Kathiawari princeling. In the heart of his victory city he would build a house of adoration, a place of disputation where everything could be said to everyone by anyone on any subject, including the nonexistence of God and the abolition of kings. He would teach himself humility in that house. No, now he was being unfair to himself. Not "teach." Rather, he would remind himself of, and recover, the humility that was already lodged deep in his heart. This humble Akbar was

perhaps his best self, created by the circumstances of his childhood in exile, clothed now in adult grandeur but still present nonetheless; a self born not in victory but in defeat. Nowadays, it was all victories, but the Emperor knew all about defeat. Defeat was his father. Its name was Humayun.

He didn't like thinking about his father. His father had smoked too much opium, lost his empire, got it back only after he pretended to become a Shiite (and gave away the Koh-i-noor diamond) so that the King of Persia would give him an army to fight with, and had then died by falling down a flight of library stairs almost immediately after regaining his throne. Akbar hadn't known his father. He himself had been born in Sind, after Humayun was defeated at Chausa, and then scurried off to Persia, abandoning his son. *His fourteen-month-old son* . Who was found and raised by his father's brother and enemy, Uncle Askari of Kandahar, wild man Uncle Askari, who would have killed Akbar himself if he could ever have got close enough, which he couldn't, because his wife was always in the way.

Akbar lived, because his aunt wanted him to. And in Kandahar he was taught about survival, about fighting and killing and hunting, and he learned much else without being taught, such as how to look out for himself and watch his tongue and not say the wrong thing, the thing that might get him killed. About the dignity of the lost, about losing, and how it cleansed the soul to accept defeat, and about letting go, avoiding the trap of holding on too tightly to what you wanted, and about abandonment in general, and in particular fatherlessness, the lessness of fathers, the lessness of the fatherless, and the best defenses of those who are less against those who are more: inwardness, forethought, cunning, humility, and good peripheral vision. The many lessons of lessness. The lessening from which growing could begin.

There were things, however, that nobody thought to teach him, and that he would never learn. "We are the Emperor of India, Bhakti Ram Jain, but we can't write our own damn name!" he shouted at his body servant at dawn, as the old man helped him with his ablutions.

"Yes, O most blessed entity, father of many sons, husband of many wives, monarch of the world, encompasser of the earth," said Bhakti Ram Jain, handing him a towel. This time, the hour of the King's levee, was also the hour of imperial flattery. Bhakti Ram Jain

proudly held the rank of Imperial Flatterer First Class, and was a master of the ornate, old-school style known as cumulative fawning. Only a man with an excellent memory for the baroque formulations of excessive encomiums could fawn cumulatively, on account of the repetitions required and the necessary precision of the sequencing. Bhakti Ram Jain's memory was unerring. He could fawn for hours.

The Emperor saw his own face scowling back at him from his basin of warm water like an augury of doom. "We are the king of kings, Bhakti Ram Jain, but we can't read our own laws. What do you say to that?"

"Yes, O most just of judges, father of many sons, husband of many wives, monarch of the world, encompasser of the earth, ruler of all that is, bringer together of all being," said Bhakti Ram Jain, warming to his task.

"We are the Sublime Radiance, the Star of India, and the Sun of Glory," said the Emperor, who knew a thing or two about flattery himself. "Yet we were raised in that shithole dump of a town where men fuck women to make babies but fuck boys to make them men —raised watching out for the attacker who worked from behind as well as the warrior straight ahead."

"Yes, O dazzling light, father of many sons, husband of many wives, monarch of the world, encompasser of the earth, ruler of all that is, bringer together of all being, Sublime Radiance, Star of India, and Sun of Glory," said Bhakti Ram Jain, who might have been deaf but who knew how to take a hint.

"Is that how a king should be raised, Bhakti Ram Jain?" the Emperor roared, tipping over the basin in his wrath. "Illiterate, ass-guarding, savage—is that what a prince should be?"

"Yes, O wiser than the wise, father of many sons, husband of many wives, monarch of the world, encompasser of the earth, ruler of all that is, bringer together of all being, Sublime Radiance, Star of India, Sun of Glory, master of human souls, forger of thy people's destiny," said Bhakti Ram Jain.

"You are pretending you can't read the words on our lips!" the Emperor shouted.

"Yes, O more insightful than the Seers, father of many—"

"You are a goat who should have his throat slit so that we can eat his meat for lunch."

"Yes, O more merciful than the gods, father—"

"Your mother fucked a pig to make you."

“Yes, O most articulate of all who articulate, f—”

“Never mind,” said the Emperor. “We feel better now. Go away. You can live.”

And here again with bright silks flying like banners from red palace windows was Sikri, shimmering in the heat like an opium vision. Here at last, with its strutting peacocks and dancing girls, was home. If the war-torn world was a harsh truth, then Sikri was a beautiful lie. The Emperor came home like a smoker returning to his pipe. He was the Enchanter. In this place he would conjure a new world, a world beyond religion, region, rank, and tribe. The most beautiful women in the world were here, and they were all his wives. The most brilliant talents in the land were assembled here, among them the Nine Jewels, the nine most brilliant of the most brilliant, and with their help there was nothing he could not accomplish. And then there was Birbal, the best of the nine, who were the best of the best. His first minister, and first friend. The first minister and greatest wit of the age greeted him at the Hiran Minar, the tower of elephants’ teeth. The Emperor’s sense of mischief was aroused. “Birbal,” Akbar said, dismounting from his horse, “will you answer me one question? We have been waiting a long time to ask it.” The first minister of legendary wit and wisdom bowed humbly. “As you wish, *Jahanpanah,* Shelter of the World.” “Well, then,” said Akbar, “which came first, the chicken or the egg?” Birbal replied at once, “The chicken.” Akbar was taken aback. “How can you be so sure?” he wanted to know. “*Huzoor* ,” Birbal replied, “I promised to answer only one question.”

The first minister and the Emperor were standing on the ramparts of the city, looking out at the wheeling crows. “Birbal,” Akbar mused, “how many crows do you imagine there are in my kingdom?” “*Jahanpanah* ,” Birbal replied, “there are exactly nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine.” Akbar was puzzled. “Suppose we have them counted,” he said, “and there are more than that, what then?” “That would mean,” Birbal replied, “that their friends from the neighboring kingdom have come to visit them.” “And if there are fewer?” “Then some of ours will have gone abroad to see the wider world.”

A great linguist was waiting at Akbar’s court, a visitor from a distant Western land: a Jesuit priest who could converse and dispute fluently in dozens of languages. He challenged the Emperor to discover his native language. While the Emperor was pondering

the riddle, his first minister circled the priest and all of a sudden kicked him violently in the backside. The priest let out a series of oaths—not in Portuguese but in Italian. “You observe, *Jahanpanah* ,” said Birbal, “that when it’s time to unleash a few insults a man will always choose his mother tongue.”

“If you were an atheist, Birbal,” the Emperor challenged his first minister, “what would you say to the true believers of all the great religions of the world?” Birbal was a devout Brahmin from Trivikrampur, but he answered unhesitatingly, “I would say to them that in my opinion they were all atheists as well; I merely believe in one god less than each of them.” “How so?” the Emperor asked. “All true believers have good reasons for disbelieving in every god except their own,” said Birbal. “And so it is they who, between them, give me all the reasons for believing in none.”

The first minister and the Emperor were standing at the Khwabgah, the Place of Dreams, looking out over the still surface of the Anup Talao, the monarch’s private, formal pool, the Pool Without Peer, the best of all possible pools, of which it was said that when the kingdom was in trouble its waters would send a warning. “Birbal,” said Akbar, “as you know, our favorite queen has the misfortune not to exist. Even though we love her best of all, admire her above all the others, and value her above even the lost Koh-i-noor, she is inconsolable. ‘Your ugliest, most sour-natured shrew of a wife is still made of flesh and blood,’ she says. ‘In the end, I will not be able to compete with her.’ ”

The first minister advised the Emperor, ‘*Jahanpanah* , you must say to her that it is precisely *in the end* that her victory will be apparent to everyone, for in the end none of the queens will exist any more than she does, while she will have enjoyed a lifetime of your love, and her fame will echo down the ages. Thus, in reality, while it is true that she does not exist, it is also true to say that she is the one who lives. If she did not, then over there, behind that high window, there would be nobody waiting for your return.”

Jodha’s sisters, her fellow-wives, resented her. How could the mighty Emperor prefer the company of a woman who did not exist? When he was gone, at least, she ought to absent herself as well; she had no business to hang around with the actually existing. She should disappear like the apparition she was, slide into a mirror or a shadow and be lost. That she did not, the living queens concluded, was the sort of solecism one had to expect from an

imaginary being. How could she have been brought up to know her manners when she had not been brought up at all? She was an untutored figment, and deserved to be ignored.

The Emperor had put her together, they fumed, by stealing bits of them all. He said she was the daughter of the Prince of Jodhpur. She was not! That was another queen, and she was not the daughter but the sister. The Emperor also believed his fictitious beloved was the mother of his firstborn son, his long-awaited firstborn son, conceived because of the blessing of a saint, that very saint beside whose hilltop hovel this victory city had been built. But she was not Prince Salim's mother, as Prince Salim's real mother, Rajkumari Hira Kunwari, known as Mariam-uz-Zamani, daughter of Raja Bihar Mal of Amer, of the Clan Kachhwaha, grievingly told anybody who would listen. So: the limitless beauty of the imaginary queen came from one consort, her Hindu religion from another, and her incalculable wealth from yet a third. Her temperament, however, was Akbar's own creation. No real woman was ever like that, so perfectly attentive, so undemanding, so endlessly available.

She was an impossibility, a fantasy of perfection. They feared her, knowing that, being impossible, she was irresistible, and that was why the King loved her best. They hated her for her theft of their histories. If they could have murdered her they would have done so, but until the Emperor tired of her, or died himself, she was immortal. The idea of the Emperor's death was not beyond contemplation, but so far the queens were not contemplating it. So far, they bore their grievances in silence. "The Emperor is mad," they grumbled inwardly, but sensibly forbore to utter the words. And when he was galloping around killing people they left the imaginary consort to her own devices. They never spoke her name. *Jodha, Jodhabai* . She wandered the palace quarters alone. She was a lonely shadow glimpsed through latticed stone screens. She was a cloth blown by the breeze. At night she stood under the little cupola on the top story of the Panch Mahal and scanned the horizon for the return of the King, who made her real.

Jodha knew that her illustrious husband must have had witchcraft in his blood. Everyone had heard about Genghis Khan's necromancy, his use of animal sacrifice and occult herbs, and how, by the use of the black arts, he managed to sire eight hundred thousand descendants.

Everyone had heard the tale of how Timur the Lame after

conquering the earth had tried to ascend to the stars and conquer the heavens, too. Everyone knew the story of how the Emperor Babar had saved the dying Humayun's life by circling his sickbed and luring Death away from the boy to the father, sacrificing himself so that his son might live. These dark pacts with Death and the Devil were her husband's heritage, and her own existence the proof of how strong the magic was in him.

The creation of a real life from a dream was a superhuman act, usurping the prerogative of the gods. In those days, Sikri was swarming with poets and artists, those preening egotists who claimed for themselves the power of language and image to conjure beautiful somethings from empty nothings, and yet neither poet nor painter, musician nor sculptor had come close to what the Emperor, the Perfect Man, had achieved. The court was also full of foreigners, pomaded exotics, weather-beaten merchants, narrow-faced priests from the West, boasting in ugly, undesirable tongues about the majesty of their lands, their gods, their kings. When the Emperor showed her the pictures of their mountains and valleys they'd brought with them, she thought of the Himalayas and of Kashmir and laughed at the foreigners' paltry approximations of natural beauty, their *vaals* and *aalps* , half-words to describe half-things. Their kings were savages, and they had nailed their god to a tree. What did she want with people as ridiculous as that?

They came in search of—what, exactly? Nothing of use. If they had possessed any wisdom, the inutility of their journeying would have been obvious to them. Travel was pointless. It removed you from the place in which you had a meaning, and to which you gave meaning in return by dedicating your life to it, and spirited you away into fairylands where you were, and looked, frankly absurd.

Yes: this place, Sikri, was a fairyland to them, just as their England and Portugal, their Holland and France, were beyond her ability to comprehend. The world was not all one thing. "We are their dream," she had told the Emperor. "And they are ours." She loved him because he never dismissed her opinions, never swatted them away with the majesty of his hand. "But imagine, Jodha, if we could awake in other men's dreams and change them, and if we had the courage to invite them into ours," he told her while they slapped down *ganjifa* playing cards one evening. "What if the whole world became a single waking dream?" She could not call him a fantasist when he spoke of waking dreams, for what else was she?

She had never left the palaces in which she had been born a decade earlier, born an adult, to the man who was not only her creator but her lover. It was true: she was both his wife and his child. If she left the palaces, or so she had always suspected, the spell would be broken and she would cease to exist. Perhaps she could do it if he, the Emperor, were there to sustain her with the strength of his belief, but if she were alone she wouldn't have a chance. Fortunately, she had no desire to leave. The labyrinth of walled and curtained corridors that connected the various buildings of the palace complex afforded her all the possibilities for travel she required. This was her little universe. She lacked a conqueror's interest in elsewhere. Let the rest of the world be for others. This square of fortified stone was hers.

She was a woman without a past, separate from history, or, rather, possessing only such history as he had been pleased to bestow upon her, and which the other queens bitterly contested. The question of her independent existence, of whether she had one, insisted on being asked, over and over, whether she willed it or not. If God turned his face away from his creation, Man, would Man simply cease to be?

That was the large-scale version of the question, but it was the selfish, small-scale versions that bothered her. Was her will free of the man who had willed her into being? Did she exist only because of his suspension of disbelief in the possibility of her existence? If he died, could she go on living?

She felt a quickening of her pulse. Something was about to happen. She felt herself strengthen, solidify. Doubts fled from her. *He was coming* .

The Emperor had entered the palace complex, and she could feel the power of his approaching need. Yes. Something was about to happen. She felt his footfall in her blood, could see him in herself, growing larger as he walked toward her. She was his mirror, because he had created her that way, but she was herself as well. Yes. Now that the act of creation was complete, she was free to be the person he had created, free, as everyone was, within the bounds of what it was in their nature to be and to do. How strong she suddenly was, how full of blood and rage. His power over her was far from absolute. All she had to be was coherent. She had never felt more coherent. Her nature rushed into her like a flood. She was not subservient. He did not like subservient women.

She would scold him first. How could he stay away so long? In his absence, she had had to combat many plots. All was untrustworthy here. The very walls were filled with whispers. She had fought them all and kept the palace safe against the day of his return, defeating the small, self-serving treacheries of the domestic staff, confounding the spying lizards hanging on the walls, stilling the scurry of conspiratorial mice. All this while she felt herself fading, while the mere struggle for survival required the exercise of almost the full force of her will. The other queens… no, she would not mention the other queens. The other queens did not exist. Only she existed. She, too, was a sorceress. She was the sorceress of herself.

There was only one man she needed to enchant, and he was here. He was not going to the other queens. He was coming to what pleased him. She was full of him, of his desire for her, of the something that was about to happen. She was the scholar of his need. She knew everything.

The door opened. She existed. She was immortal, because she had been created by love.

He was wearing a cockaded golden turban and a coat of gold brocade. He was wearing the dust of his conquered land like a soldier's badge of honor. He was wearing a sheepish grin. "'I' wanted to get home faster," he said. "'I' was delayed." There was something awkward and experimental about his speech. What was the matter with him ?

She decided to ignore his uncharacteristic hesitancy and proceed as she had planned.

"Oh, you 'wanted,' " she said, standing upright, in her ordinary day clothes, pulling a silken head scarf across the lower portion of her face. "A man doesn't know what he wants. A man doesn't want what he says he wants. A man wants only what he needs."

He was puzzled by her refusal to acknowledge his descent into the first person, which honored her, which was supposed to make her swoon with joy, which was his newest discovery and his declaration of love. Puzzled, and a little put out.

"How many men have you known, that you are so knowledgeable?" he said, frowning, approaching her. "Did you dream up men for yourself while 'I' was away, or did you find men to pleasure you, men who were not dreams? Are there men that 'I' must kill?" Surely this time she would notice the revolutionary,

erotic newness of the pronoun? Surely now she would understand what he was trying to say?

She did not. She believed she knew what aroused him, and was thinking only of the words she had to say to make him hers.

"Women think less about men in general than the generality of men can imagine. Women think about their own men less often than their men like to believe. All women need all men less than all men need them. This is why it is so important to keep a good woman down. If you do not keep her down, she will surely get away."

She hadn't dressed up to receive him. "If you want dolls," she said, "go over to the doll's house, where they're waiting for you, prettifying and squealing and pulling one another's hair." This was a mistake. She had mentioned the other queens. His brow furrowed and his eyes clouded over. She had made a false move. The spell had almost broken. She poured all the force of her eyes into his, and he came back to her. The magic held. She raised her voice and continued. She didn't flatter him. "You already look like an old man," she said. "Your sons will imagine you're their grandfather." She didn't congratulate him on his victories. "If history had gone down a different path," she said, "then the old gods would still rule, the gods you have defeated, the many-limbed many-headed gods, full of stories and deeds instead of punishments and laws, the gods of being standing beside the goddesses of doing, dancing gods, laughing gods, gods of thunderbolts and flutes, so many, many gods, and maybe that would have been an improvement." She knew she was beautiful and now, dropping her thin silk veil, she unleashed that beauty, and he was lost. "When a boy dreams up a woman, he gives her big breasts and a small brain," she murmured. "When a king imagines a wife, he dreams of me."

She was adept at the seven types of unguiculation, which is to say the art of using the nails to enhance the act of love. Before he left on his long journey, she had marked him with the Three Deep Marks, which were scratches made by the first three fingers of her right hand upon his back and his chest, and on his testicles as well: something to remember her by. Now that he was home, she could make him shudder, could actually make his hair stand on end, by placing her nails on his cheeks and lower lip and chest, without leaving any mark. Or she could mark him, leaving a half-moon shape upon his neck. She could push her nails slowly into his face.

She could perform the Hopping of the Hare, marking the areolas around his nipples without touching him anywhere else on his body. And no living woman was as skilled as she at the Peacock's Foot, that delicate maneuver: she placed her thumb on his left nipple and with her four other fingers she "walked" around his breast, digging in her long nails, her curved, clawlike nails, which she had guarded and sharpened in anticipation of this very moment, pushing them into the Emperor's skin until they made marks resembling the trail left by a peacock as it walks through mud. She knew what he would say while she did these things. He would tell her how, in the loneliness of his Army tent, he would close his eyes and imitate her movements, imagine his nails moving on his body to be hers, and be aroused.

She waited for him to say it, but he didn't. Something was different. There was an impatience in him now, an irritation almost, an annoyance she did not understand. It was as if the many sophistications of the lover's art had lost their charms and he wished simply to possess her and be done with it. She understood that he had changed. And now everything else would change as well.

As for the Emperor, he never again referred to himself in the singular in the presence of another person. He was plural in the eyes of the world, plural even in the judgment of the woman who loved him, and plural he would remain. He had learned his lesson.

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* Emperor Akbar was one of the greatest rulers India has ever seen. He belonged to the Mughal dynasty and ruled from 1556 to 1605. This extract is taken from *The Enchantress of Florence* .

SIX

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SHIVAJI AND HIS TIMES *

JADUNATH SARKAR

BIJAPUR PLANS TO SUBDUE SHIVAJI

After the Mughal invasion of 1657 had rolled back and Aurangzib had marched away to Northern India, the Bijapur Government gained respite and a sudden accession of vigour. True, the old prime minister, Khan Muhammad, was murdered on a false suspicion of collusion with Aurangzib during the late war; but his successor, Khawas Khan, was an able administrator. The Queen Mother, Bari Sahiba, who virtually ruled the State till her fatal journey to Mecca (1660), was a woman of masterful spirit and experienced in the conduct of business. Freed for the time being from the constant menace of the Mughals on the frontier, the Bijapur Government now began to call its refractory vassals to account. Shahji was asked to punish his rebel son, but he frankly repudiated Shiva as his son and left the Government free to punish him without any consideration for his father's feelings. Measures had, therefore, to be taken for crushing Shivaji by force.

This was, however, no easy task. Shiva's military strength was not despicable; and the Bijapuri nobles shrank from the idea of a campaign among the hills and jungles of the Western Ghats. The command of the expedition against him went abegging at the Bijapur Court, till Afzal Khan accepted it.

AFZAL KHAN'S EXPEDITION AGAINST SHIVA

Abdullah Bhatari, surnamed Afzal Khan, was a noble of the first rank, who had risen to power and honour under the late Sultan of Bijapur. As a general he was of the highest standing in the kingdom, being the peer of Bahlol Khan and Randaula Khan, and had fought with conspicuous bravery and skill in the recent war with the Mughals. But the resources of Bijapur had been crippled by that war and the disorder and impoverishment natural in a regency under a veiled woman. Only 10,000 cavalry * could be spared to accompany Afzal, while popular report had raised the strength of Shiva's Mavle infantry to 60,000 as the result of his conquest of Javli, and he had also enlisted a regiment of valuable Pathan mercenaries from the disbanded soldiery of Bijapur. Afzal Khan, therefore, did not prefer an open contest of force with Shiva. Indeed, he was instructed by the Dowager Queen to effect the capture or murder of Shiva by "pretending friendship" with him and offering to secure his pardon from Adil Shah. * *

The Bijapuri general had accepted the command in a spirit of bravado, and even boasted in open Court that he would bring Shiva back a captive without having once to dismount from his own horse. But his mind must have been oppressed by the heaviness of his task. He planned to effect his purpose by a combination of "frightfulness" and diplomacy. From Bijapur the expedition marched due north to Tuljapur, one of the holiest shrines in Maharashtra and the seat of Bhavani, the guardian goddess of the house of Bhonsla. Afzal's strategy was either to make a sweep round Shiva's line of southern fortresses and penetrate to Puna through the exposed eastern flank of the Maratha kingdom, or to provoke Shiva, by a gross outrage on his faith, into coming out of his fastnesses and meeting the Bijapuri army in the open. At Tuljapur he ordered the stone image of Bhavani to be broken and pounded into dust in a hand-mill.

Then the news reached him that Shiva had left Rajgarh and betaken himself to Pratapgarh in the south-west. Afzal now gave up the objective of Puna, and turned due west towards Pratapgarh. On the way he committed fresh sacrileges on the gods and outrages on the Brahmans at Manikeshwar, Pandharpur and Mahadev, and in a fortnight reached Wai, 20 miles north of Satara. This last town lay within his fief, and here he halted for some days devising means for

luring Shiva out of the hills by diplomacy or capturing him by means of local chieftains. He wrote to Vithoji Haibat Rao, the deshmukh of Gunjan-maval, to join with his men near Javli and assist the Bijapuri army as directed. Khandoji Khopde, the rival of Kanhoji Zedhe for the deshmukhi of Rohidkhore, waited on Afzal at Wai and gave a written undertaking to arrest and hand over Shiva on condition of being granted the deshmukhi.

While these plots were being hatched at Wai, Afzal sent his land-steward Krishnaji Bhaskar to Shivaji with a very alluring message, saying, "Your father has long been a great friend of mine, and you are, therefore, no stranger to me. Come and see me, and I shall use my influence to make Adil Shah confirm your possession of Konkan and the forts you now hold. I shall secure for you further distinctions and military equipment from our Government. If you wish to attend the Court, you will be welcomed. Or, if you want to be excused personal attendance there, you will be exempted."

SHIVAJI'S DANGER AND PERPLEXITY

Meantime, the news of Afzal's coming had caused great terror and perplexity among Shiva's followers. Hitherto they had surprised obscure forts, looted isolated convoys, or fought skirmishes with the small irregular forces of private jagirdars. Here was their first encounter with the regular forces of Bijapur, led by a famous general, and numbering 10,000 with artillery, transport, and all the other material of the best-equipped armies of that age. Moreover, Afzal's march from Bijapur to Wai had been an unbroken success; the Marathas had not ventured to oppose him in the open, and he had freely looted and laid waste the territory of Shiva that he had crossed. Tales of his irresistible strength and ruthlessness had reached the Maratha camp. Shivaji's officers naturally shrank from the idea of resistance. At the first council of war which he held, they urged him to make peace, as the enemy was strong and hostilities would only cause a great loss of life to their side.

This was the most critical moment in the career of Shivaji. If he capitulated to Afzal Khan, all his hopes of independence and future greatness would be gone for ever, and he would have to end his days as a tame vassal of Bijapur, even if he escaped his sovereign's vengeance for his late rebellion. Yet, the open defiance of Bijapur authority now would for ever close the door to reconciliation with

that State, and he must be prepared ever afterwards to defend his life and independence against the power of that kingdom and of the Mughals and other enemies, without a single friend or protector to turn to in the wide world. His ministers and generals advocated the more ignoble policy. Shiva himself was in a terrible dilemma. For a night he pondered his life's choice and then chose the manlier part. A legend, as old as his contemporaries, tells us that the care-worn chieftain's sleep was broken by a vision of the goddess Bhavani who urged him to confront Afzal boldly and promised him victory and her full protection.

His mind was made up. Next morning the council met again. Moved by Shiva's manly words, appeal to their sense of honour, and report of the goddess's blessings, they resolved on war. He now made his dispositions for the contest with the utmost forethought and skill. He took counsel of his mother, who blessed him and foretold his success, and then he left minute instructions for carrying on the government in the event of his being killed. The armies under Moro Trimbak Pingle and Netaji Palkar were summoned from Konkan and the Ghats respectively, and ordered to take post within easy reach of Pratapgarh.

PLOTS AND COUNTER-PLOTS

Then came Afzal's envoy, Krishnaji Bhaskar, with the invitation to a parley. Shiva treated him with respect, and at night met him in secrecy and solemnly appealed to him as a Hindu and a priest to tell him of the Khan's real intentions. Krishnaji yielded so far as to hint that the Khan seemed to harbour some plan of mischief. Shivaji then sent the envoy back with Gopinath Pant, his own agent, agreeing to Afzal's proposal of an interview, provided that the Khan gave him a solemn assurance of safety. Gopinath's real mission was to find out the strength of Afzal's army and other useful information about it and learn for himself what the Khan's real aim was. Through Gopinath, Shiva vowed that no harm would be done to Afzal during the interview, and Afzal, on his part, gave similar assurances of his honesty of purpose. But Gopinath learnt by a liberal use of bribes that Afzal's officers were convinced that "he had so arranged matters that Shiva would be arrested at the interview, as he was too cunning to be caught by open fight." On his return, Gopinath told it all to Shiva and urged him to anticipate

the treacherous attack on himself by murdering Afzal at a lonely meeting and then surprising his army.

Shiva, taking the hint from Gopinath, feigned terror and refused to visit Wai, unless the Khan met him nearer home and personally promised him safety and future protection. Afzal agreed to make this concession. By Shiva's orders a path was cut through the dense forest all the way from Wai to Pratapgarh and food and drink were kept ready for the Bijapur army at various points of it. By way of the Radtondi pass (below 'Bombay Point' of the Mahabaleshwar plateau), Afzal Khan marched to Par, a village lying one mile below Pratapgarh on the south, and his men encamped there in scattered groups, deep down in the valley near every pool of water at the source of the Koyna.

Gopinath was sent up the hill to report the Khan's arrival. The meeting was arranged to take place next day. The place chosen for the interview was the crest of an eminence, below the fort of Pratapgarh, and overlooking the valley of the Koyna. On both sides of the forest-path leading up the hillside to the pavilion picked soldiers were posted in ambush at intervals by Shivaji. Here he erected tents and set up a richly decorated canopy with gorgeous carpets and cushions worthy of a royal guest.

Then he prepared himself for the meeting. Under his tunic he wore a coat of chain armour and below his turban he placed a steel cap for the protection of the skull. What offensive arms he had, nobody could see; but concealed in his left hand was a set of steel claws (*baghnakh*) fastened to the fingers by a pair of rings, and up his right sleeve lay hidden a thin sharp dagger called the scorpion (*bichwa* .) His companions were only two, but both men of extraordinary courage and agility—Jiv Mahala, an expert swordsman, and Shambhuji Kavji, the murderer of Hanumant Rao More. Each of them carried two swords and a shield.

As the party was about to descend from the fort a saintly female figure appeared in their midst. It was Jija Bai. Shiva bowed to his mother. She blessed him saying, "Victory be yours!" and solemnly charged his companions to keep him safe; they vowed obedience. Then they walked down to the foot of the fort and waited.

INTERVIEW BETWEEN SHIVA AND AFZAL

Meanwhile Afzal Khan had started from his camp at Par, with a

strong escort of more than a thousand musketeers. Gopinath objected to it, saying that such a display of force would scare away Shiva from the interview, and that the Khan should, therefore, take with himself only two bodyguards exactly as Shiva had done. So, he left his troops some distance behind and made his way up the hill-path in a *palki* accompanied by two soldiers and a famous swordsman named Sayyid Banda, as well as the two Brahman envoys, Gopinath and Krishnaji. Arrived in the tent, Afzal Khan angrily remarked on its princely furniture and decorations as far above the proper style of a jagirdar's son. But Gopinath soothed him by saying that all these rich things would soon go to the Bijapur palace as the first fruits of Shiva's submission.

Messengers were sent to hurry up Shiva, who was waiting below the fort. He advanced slowly, then halted on seeing Sayyid Banda, and sent to demand that the man should be removed from the tent. This was done, and at last Shivaji entered the pavilion. On each side four men were present—the principal, two armed retainers and an envoy. But Shiva was seemingly unarmed, * like a rebel who had come to surrender, while the Khan had his sword at his side.

The attendants stood below. Shiva mounted the raised platform and bowed to Afzal. The Khan rose from his seat, advanced a few steps, and opened his arms to receive Shiva in his embrace. The short slim Maratha only came up to the shoulders of his opponent. Suddenly Afzal tightened his clasp, and held Shiva's neck in his left arm with an iron grip, while with his right hand he drew his long straight-bladed dagger and struck at the side of Shiva. The hidden armour rendered the blow harmless. Shiva groaned in agony as he felt himself being strangled. But in a moment he recovered from the surprise, passed his left arm round the Khan's waist and tore his bowels open with a blow of the steel claws. Then with the right hand he drove the *bichwa* into Afzal's side. The wounded man relaxed his hold, and Shivaji wrested himself free, jumped down from the platform, and ran towards his own men outside.

The Khan cried out, "Treachery! Murder! Help! Help!" The attendants ran up from both sides. Sayyid Banda faced Shiva with his long straight sword and cut his turban in twain, making a deep dint in the steel cap beneath. Shiva quickly took a rapier from Jiv Mahala and began to parry. But Jiv Mahala came round with his other sword, hacked off the right arm of the Sayyid, and then killed him.

Meanwhile the bearers had placed the wounded Khan in his palki, and started for his camp. But Shambhuji Kavji slashed at their legs, made them drop the palki, and then cut off Afzal's head, which he carried in triumph to Shiva. *

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* Chhatrapati Shivaji was the best-known ruler of the Maratha empire. He ruled from 1674 to 1680. This extract is taken from *Shivaji and His Times* .

* This is the strength of Afzal's army as given by contemporaries, *viz* ., *Tarikh-i-Ali II. 76* and the English letter quoted in the next note. The Maratha accounts, all very much later, put it at 12,000 cavalry besides infantry; 30,000 "including 3,000 Mavles familiar with the locality." ** "Against Shivaji the Queen this year sent Abdullah Khan with an army of 10,000 horse and foot, and because she knew with that strength he was not able to resist Shivaji, she counselled him to *pretend friendship* with his enemy *which he did* . And the other [i.e., Shivaji], whether through intelligence or suspicion it is not known, dissembled his love towards him & c." (Factors at Rajapur to Council at Surat, 10 Oct. 1659, *F. R. Rajapur*).

* Khafi Khan states that both Afzal and Shivaji came to the interview unarmed. But *kamar wa karda* , 'with no sword girt on the waist,' was the customary attitude of the defeated party, so often described in Persian histories.

* The head was buried beneath a tower (called *Abdullah burj*) in an outwork on the south-eastern side of the lower fort. A short distance from it is the temple of Bhavani built by Shivaji.

SEVEN

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TIPU SULTAN *

RAJMOHAN GANDHI

Shorter than his father, darker in the skin and possessing larger eyes, Tipu wore (Wilks informs us) ‘a plain unencumbered attire, which he equally exacted from those around him… He was usually mounted, and attached great importance to horsemanship, in which he was considered to excel… The conveyance in a palankeen he derided’.

> The tiger was his icon.
> Tipu used to say it was better to live for two days like a tiger than drag out an existence like a sheep for two hundred years… He kept six [tigers] in his fortress-city of Seringapatam, where his throne was shaped and striped like a tiger… [T]he hilt of his sword was in the form of a snarling tiger, and his favourite toy was a mechanical tiger straddling a British officer while the victim squealed in terror .

Among dozens of chiefs in eighteenth-century India, Tipu was the only one to have really scared the British. His fame grew, and Tipu found a seemingly permanent place in the pantheon of India’s historical heroes. Knowledge that he could be bigoted and ruthless did not dent the image. In the last two decades or so, the scene has changed. ‘Tipu was a cruel fanatic’ appears to be the only truth for some.

More useful than picking a ‘hero’ or ‘villain’ label for a past ruler is to know the issues confronting him and his state, the alignment of forces for and against him, the ruler’s responses and initiatives, and the people’s reactions at the time.

There is plenty of material to examine, including biographies by two men in his employ, one in Persian by Mir Hussain Kirmani, the other in Marathi by Ramchandra Rao Punganuri (which appears to be based almost entirely on Kirmani’s book); and accounts by Britons like Wilks who fought against him, besides dozens of later works.

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Although the British briefly took Coimbatore from Tipu, the latter won a bigger prize, the port of Mangaluru, obliging the Company to sign a treaty with him. This March 1784 ‘Treaty of Mangalore’, marking the end of the Second Anglo–Mysore War, restored Coimbatore to Tipu and revived French interest in him.

Blocking the shortest route between Srirangapatna and the Malabar coast, and hosting the spirited Kodava community, the mountains of Coorg were governed by Bidanur-linked rajas until Haidar seized control and imprisoned the ruling family.

Always restive at their subjugation, the proud Kodavas were enraged when, following his victory over the British at Mangaluru, Tipu tightened control over Coorg, strengthened his garrison in its chief fort in Madikeri (Mercara), chastised their chiefs for rising against his late father, and taunted them for their religious beliefs.

The Kodavas again rebelled, and Tipu replied by taking a big army, inclusive of a French battalion, to Coorg. The Kodavas were suppressed, but fury and bigotry joined firmness. A large number of Kodavas were killed or forcibly converted, and many were dragged to Srirangapatna.

When, in a treaty signed in 1783 in Paris, the British recognized American independence, Frenchmen involved with India were emboldened. Bussy wondered whether they could not ‘unite the three Indian powers [Marathas, Hyderabad and Mysore] against the English without compromising ourselves’.

But Indians were not interested in allying with one another. The nizam had in fact influenced the Mughal emperor at this time, the feeble Shah Alam II, against recognizing Tipu as Mysore’s ruler.

As Bussy himself noted, 'The Marathas and the Nizam have made an alliance to destroy Tipu Sultan. This plan marvellously suits the English.' Moreover, Viscount de Souillac, Governor General of France's eastern territories, regarded Tipu as 'proud, vain, imperious and undependable'. To make Tipu dependent on the French, de Souillac wanted the British to defeat him.

Eventually, however, with Tipu firmly in control in Mysore, and both the Marathas and the nizam reaching an understanding with the English, Governor General de Souillac agreed that Tipu could send an embassy to Louis XVI in Paris. A ship, *l'Aurore,* was provided for the trip.

On 9 March 1786, four ships including *l'Aurore* sailed from the Malabar coast carrying three ambassadors, retinues of around 900 persons in all, four elephants (one each for the rulers of Turkey, France, and England, the fourth to sell for money), large boxes of personal effects and goods for sale. There was a scramble to get on board, for the intention was to call at Islam's holy places on the return journey.

The mission proved a disaster. Three of the four vessels were destroyed on the voyage and only a handful returned alive. Shipwrecks, plague, and the winter in Constantinople (Istanbul) killed hundreds, including women and children .

Sailing first to Muscat and thence to Basra, the party had journeyed by land from there to Istanbul via Mosul and Diyarbakir, often across dangerous terrain. An Indian merchant in Muscat named Maoji Sheth and his agents in Basra, Sewa and Ram, helped, but dissension among the ambassadors damaged commerce as well as diplomacy.

In November 1787 in Istanbul, the Sultan of Turkey, Abdul Hamid I, received what remained of the mission. Tipu's throne was indeed recognized, but this was poor consolation. Fighting the Russians at this time, the Turks had no desire to antagonize the English as well by helping Tipu, and French agents in Istanbul told Tipu's men that the mood in France had changed and they would not be welcome there.

Making an about-turn, the truncated mission left for home, stopping en route at sacred places in Arabia. When the voyage ended on the Malabar coast in December 1789, only a handful were alive to step ashore.

An insistent Tipu had, meanwhile, sent another mission directly

to France. This managed to reach Paris and was received in August 1788 by Louis XVI and his queen, Marie Antoinette, in the Salon d'Hercules at the Palace of Versailles.

For a few days the Orientals created a buzz, but the French Revolution was around the corner, even though the king and the queen would not be executed until 1793.

Not recognizing the changes in France, Tipu's envoys asked for 10,000 French soldiers, for whom (they said) Mysore would pay, and they promised the French vast tracts of land in South India (close to Madras and Pondicherry) and also in Bengal and Bihar. The proposals were not taken seriously. The France of 1788 was in no condition to think of helping Tipu.

There were pettier problems. The Mysoreans complained that the palace housing them was not large enough, while French hosts hinted that gifts brought for their king were not valuable enough. Reluctant, it seems, to leave France, the delegation had to be persuaded to depart.

These westward expeditions ordered by Tipu in the second half of the 1780s were ill-conceived, ill-prepared, ill-timed, and expensive.

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When, in December 1789, the residue of the mission to Turkey returned to the southern Malabar coast, Tipu was close by, trying to breach the so-called Travancore Lines, which had been constructed in the 1760s for Raja Rama Varma of Travancore by his Dutch/Belgian commander-in-chief, the ingenious Eustachius de Lannoy.

De Lannoy who had been imprisoned earlier was enlisted to strengthen Travancore's forces by Rama Varma's predecessor, Marthanda Varma. While protecting Travancore against ground incursions from the north, the Lines were, in fact, built on the land of Travancore's neighbour and frequent rival, Cochin (Kochi). For decades a Dutch possession, Cochin had become a Mysore tributary in the 1770s.

Proceeding for four miles or so from the sea to a river named Chinnamangalam, and another 24 or 25 miles from the river to the hills, the Lines consisted, for much of their length, of a trench or ditch 16 feet broad and 20 feet deep. Bamboo hedges and a rampart protected the trench. Nearby, also in Cochin territory, stood the fort

of Cranganore (Kodungallur).

Few traces of the Lines remain today, but in December 1789 these comprised the site for Travancore's successful defence against Tipu's army. Earlier that year, Rama Varma, whose ultimate goal was the 'unification of Malabar under one flag', had bought Cranganore Fort from the Dutch. This transaction between Travancore and the Dutch offended Tipu, who also desired the fort and felt that as Cochin's suzerain he should have been offered it first.

On 28 December, about 800 of Travancore's Nairs, aided by a six-pounder gun, not only stopped the reputed Mysorean army from capturing the Lines, they inflicted a great loss on the attackers, who retreated in panic.

Reports later circulated, to which Wilks would give credence, that Tipu was among the invaders, that he was wounded by a musket ball, and that his palanquin and arms were captured by the Nairs. The story was denied. Though in the vicinity, Tipu, it was said, was not at the Lines that day, and it was reiterated that Tipu never used a palanquin.

Yet the Nair victory of 28 December 1789 was a reality which Malayalis have recalled with pride ever since. In April 1790, the Mysoreans again attacked the Lines and captured them, and in May Cranganore Fort, too, was taken, but when news reached Tipu that the English were ready to invade his kingdom, he marched back towards Srirangapatna.

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The British used the Travancore incident to launch an all-out war, known to history as the Third Anglo–Mysore War. Named a British ally in the Treaty of Mangalore, Travancore sought the Company's aid, thereby giving the opportunity for which Lord Charles Cornwallis was waiting.

After fighting unsuccessfully in the western hemisphere against the Americans, Cornwallis had become Governor General in India in 1786. Nursing complaints against Mysore and tempted by its land and money, the Marathas as well as Hyderabad's nizam (Mir Nizam Ali) joined the war on the British side.

Not everyone in the Company favoured a war on Mysore. Controlling a larger territory and capable of mobilizing a much

bigger army, the Marathas were seen by many as Britain's primary obstacle in India. However, a twenty-eight-year-old lieutenant called Thomas Munro, posted in Ambur near Vellore to gather intelligence on Tipu's forces, argued for the opposite viewpoint. In January 1790, he wrote to his father :

> It has long been accepted as an axiom…by the directors of our affairs, both at home and in this country, that Tippoo ought to be preserved as a barrier between us and the Mahrattas… [But this] is to support a powerful and ambitious enemy to defend us from a weak one…
>
> [Mysore has] the most simple and despotic monarchy in the world, in which every department, civil and military, possesses the regularity and system [created] by the genius of Hyder…
>
> The other…a confederacy of independent chiefs possessing extensive dominions, now acting in concert, now jealous of each other…and at all times liable to be [swayed] by the most distant prospect of private gain, can never be a dangerous enemy… [And] it maintains no standing army and is impelled by no religious tenets to attempt the extirpation of men of a different belief.

On the other hand, Munro argued, 'Tippoo supports an army of 110,000 men, follows with great eagerness every principle of European tactics…[a]nd he is, with all of his extraordinary talents, a furious zealot in a faith which,' claimed Munro, 'founds eternal happiness on the destruction of other sects.'

The thinking in Munro's letter prevailed, and Tipu was targeted. The allied forces moved in from several points around his domain. Taking personal command of the British force, the battle-seasoned Cornwallis advanced from Fort St George. Coimbatore, lying due south of the Mysore capital, was quickly taken by another British column.

Two Maratha armies marched down from the kingdom's northwest, one proceeding south to Dharwad, the other southeast to Kurnool. While the nizam's army also marched southwards on the Deccan Plateau, British units sailing from Bombay captured Calicut and Cannanore on the Malabar coast and lay poised to tighten, from the southwest, the noose around Srirangapatna, which was an island surrounded and protected by the Kaveri.

Tragically for the people trapped in the war, it was also a time

of acute scarcity. Nine years later, Buchanan, the Company's doctor/scientist/officer, arriving in a place not far from Chikballapur called Bomma Samudram, would write in his diary:

> *25 July 1800:* [The horrors of famine] were never so severely felt here, as during the invasion of Lord Cornwallis, when, the country being attacked on all sides and penetrated in every direction by hostile armies, or by defending ones little less destructive, *one half at least of the inhabitants perished of absolute want.*

It is a sober truth of history-writing that a phrase like this is located, inserted, italicized—and quietly abandoned.

~

Gaining Bangalore in March 1791, Cornwallis made it a base to which he returned more than once while attempting junctions with the advancing Maratha and Hyderabad armies. In March 1791, we may mark, 'the town of Bangalore…situated north of the fort…was circular in form and *about three miles in circumference* . Its streets were wide… Few towns in India [had] better houses and richer inhabitants.'

Visiting the city nine years later, here is what Buchanan would say of Cornwallis's attack on it:

> Bangalore, or Bangaluru, [is] a city which was founded by Hyder, and which, during the judicious government of that prince, became a place of importance. Its trade was then great, and its manufactures numerous.
>
> Tippoo began its misfortunes by prohibiting the trade with the dominions of Arcot and Hyderabad… [His measures] had greatly injured the place; but it was still populous, and many individuals were rich, when Lord Cornwallis arrived before it, with his army in great distress from want of provisions.
>
> This reduced [Cornwallis] to the necessity of giving the assault immediately, and the town was of course plundered. The rich inhabitants had previously removed their most valuable effects into the fort; but these too fell a prey to the invaders, when that citadel also was taken by storm.

In a counter-measure, Tipu retook an unguarded Coimbatore.

Penetrating between two British forces, he also reached Pondicherry, but found its French in no state to support him. Revolution in their homeland had paralyzed them.

Trying also to negotiate, Tipu sent to the British camp old Apajee Ram, 'the veteran diplomatist', as Wilks calls him, who twenty years earlier had talked wittily with the Marathas. Cornwallis rebuffed this initiative of February 1791, as also another feeler from Tipu three months later. The Governor General's stand would be sharply criticized by James Mill in his 1817 *History of British India* , for four subsequent decades the standard guide for the Empire's officers in India.

~

Serving as a soldier in Cornwallis's force, Wilks would later provide eye-witness accounts that reveal the Company's contempt for Indian allies while also providing vivid pictures. Referring to the nizam's army, which joined the English near Bangalore in April 1791, Wilks mentions 'ten thousand men well-mounted on horses in excellent condition' before adding:

> It is probable that no national or private collection of ancient armour in Europe contains any weapon or article of personal equipment not [present] in this motley crowd: the Parthian bow and arrow, the iron club of Scythia, sabres of every age and nation, lances of every strength and description, and matchlocks of every form, metallic helmets of every pattern, a steel bar descending diagonally as a protection to the face…complete coats of mail, and quilted jackets, sabre-proof…

To this grand appearance was joined:

> the total absence of every symptom of order, or obedience, or command, excepting groups collected round their respective flags; [with] every individual an independent warrior, self-impelled, affecting to be the champion whose single arm was to achieve victory….

According to Wilks, the British had expected the nizam's army to watch the terrain and provide resources from 'the country to be traversed', but this support was not forthcoming. Worse, the nizam's men consumed forage and grain from grounds on which the English

were encamped and plundered villages friendly to the British.

In the 1791 summer, as Cornwallis moved west with his army, his goal was to ford the Kaveri along with the nizam's army and, he hoped, the Marathas, and attack the capital. To assure victory, a British force launched by sea from Bombay and moving east from Calicut was also to join the assault.

This cherished plan had to be given up because Cornwallis's army was close to starvation, the Maratha ally seemed nowhere near, and Tipu's soldiers had put up a strong fight at Arakere, 10 miles east of Srirangapatna, before retreating safely to their capital. A British bid to rupture a dam near Arakere to ease the advance of their heavy train was 'abandoned' because of 'the solidity of the work'.

In the area around Srirangapatna, Tipu prevented, for a crucial week, the coming together of his foes, a feat accomplished through agile agents on the ground who kept Tipu informed of his enemies' movements while misleading enemy attackers regarding the whereabouts of their allies. Wilks would write :

> With whatever care Lord Cornwallis concealed his intentions… they were distinctly known to the Sultaun… Tippoo's activity against the English army was skillfully displayed in the dissemination of false intelligence.

Wilks's sharply negative view, overall, of Tipu lends interest to his observations on the abilities Tipu and his men showed during the 1791 summer. Of the Arakere battle, he says:

> Tippoo Sultaun did not decline the [confrontation], and praise cannot in justice be denied to him…[for] executing his movements with…promptitude and judgment.

About the British column advancing from the southwest, which was led by Robert Abercromby, Wilks would write:

> The admirable efficiency of the Sultaun's light troops had prevented all communication of General Abercromby's situation on which Lord Cornwallis's determinations would very materially depend.

The long trek towards Srirangapatna from Bangalore had been slow and hard for Cornwallis's British, who faced a great shortage of

provisions. Tipu's irregular cavalry had succeeded in cutting off local supplies, and manual support too was absent, for Mysoreans were unwilling to help.

> Many of the heavy guns, as well as the field pieces…and all the battering train and almost every public cart in the army were dragged by the troops.

His men exhausted and hungry, and the Marathas conspicuously missing, Cornwallis instructed not only a retreat but also the destruction of his heavy siege equipment. Tipu had won against a Governor General who had graduated from a major war in America.

~

Three days after that embarrassing order was implemented, the weary British were surprised to face a new body of horsemen. Luckily for Cornwallis, these belonged not to Tipu but to the Marathas. Wilks recorded that Tipu's light cavalry had prevented word of their arrival from reaching the British camp until the Marathas were 'actually in sight'.

From Wilks we obtain more pictures, jaundiced perhaps, yet revealing, of scenes from the 1791 summer.

Having not had a wholesome meal for a fortnight, the hungry British and the equally hungry Indian contingents in the Company's force looked with eager eyes at the freshly-arrived Maratha army, but as Wilks put it, 'the inimitable mercantile policy of a Mahratta chief in his own camp was skillfully exhibited in holding up exorbitant prices'. The British found some consolation when they saw the nizam's troops also suffering from Maratha 'exactions'.

Wilks contrasted the nizam's 'stately' but lethargic 'cavaliers' with 'the mean aspect and black meagre visage of the common Mahratta horseman' who however 'foraged at large and effectually commanded the resources of the country'. In areas vacated by the retreating British, the Marathas apparently plundered everything 'down to the meanest article of wearing apparel'.

But there were impressive features as well. At a 'bazar of a Mahratta camp', its 'famished visitors', of whom Wilks was one, saw:

> the spoils of the east and the industry of the west: English broad

> cloth, a Birmingham pen-knife, shawls of Cashmire, diamonds, oxen, sheep and poultry; dried salt fish; and the tables of the money-changers overspread with the coins of every country of the east, evidence of mercantile activity inconceivable in any camp excepting that of systematic plunderers.

Also available for purchase by British soldiers were 'what their own Indian capitals could not then produce, except as European imports —excellent sword belts'.

In the weeks following the retreat, the British noticed quite a few Mysorean accomplishments. Of the Nandidurg Fort, about 31 miles north of Bangalore, Wilks would write:

> Every fortified place the English had hitherto seen in Mysoor exhibited evidence of the extraordinary attention paid by Tippoo Sultaun to [its] repair and improvement, but the works of Nundidroog, a granite rock of tremendous height, seemed to have engrossed in a peculiar degree his design of rendering it impregnable.

Wilks refers also to the 'fresh vigour' and 'a very respectable degree of skill' with which Tipu's commander Qamaruddin fought the British in the Coimbatore-Palghat area in October 1791.

~

Some Maratha units plundering in Tipu's richest province, Bidanur, had meanwhile pillaged the ancient Hindu monastery, possibly founded in the ninth century, at Sringeri, which lay about 75 miles northwest of Srirangapatna. The matha was desecrated, many defenders were killed, and the raiders made off with about sixty lakh rupees in cash or jewels.

The monastery's head, successor to an unbroken line of Sankaracharyas, appealed for aid to Tipu, whose support the matha had evidently received from 1785.

That appeal, and Tipu's positive response, form part of a well-preserved 1791 correspondence, conducted not in Persian but in Kannada, which discloses Tipu's support for the matha, his instruction to the asif or provincial governor of Bidanur to help the Sankaracharya, the latter's appreciation for aid and security received, and also the Sankaracharya's blessings for a Tipu striving

to defend his territory.

~

Alleging that the threat to his capital prompted Tipu to order the execution of twenty English boys who had been detained and trained as ‘singers and dancers’ in the style of ‘Hindoostani dancing girls’, Wilks also relates an account of prominent Brahmins around Tipu who were charged with treason and executed.

An unnamed Indian spy recruited by Cornwallis’s intelligence chief, Captain William Macleod, was caught by Tipu’s men, who found an incriminating letter in Kannada in the spy’s hollow walking stick. ‘A Muslim official who knew Kannada was ordered to examine the letter,’ and the writer was identified and ‘seized, a Brahmin forcibly circumcised and now named Mahommed Abbas’.

The letter implicated ‘Sheshgere Row, brother of the treasurer Kishen Row’—the long-serving Krishna Rao, who had given Purniah an early break. According to Wilks, not only Seshagiri Rao but also Krishna Rao and two other brothers were ‘privately tortured and dispatched’.

Writing his account after Tipu’s fall, Wilks reported that because a Muslim had inspected the damaging letter, many Brahmins ‘continue under the impression’ that the alleged involvement of Krishna Rao and his brothers in ‘any act of treachery’ was a ‘calumny’ invented by ‘Seyed Saheb’, the inspector’s influential brother-in-law, in revenge for cuts that treasurer Krishna Rao had previously imposed on money going to ‘Seyed Saheb’. Adds Wilks:

> The Sultaun, in reviewing the measures of his reign, had reasonable cause for distrusting all bramins, and such were all his secretaries for the languages of the south.

After Tipu’s fall, Wilks discussed with Dewan Purniah, with whom he worked closely, the treason charge against Krishna Rao. He writes: ‘I could never get Poornea, his colleague, to give an opinion’.

According to Wilks, Abbas admitted his guilt before Tipu, by whom he was summoned, but refused to implicate others .

> ‘And how long,’ said Tippoo, ‘have you been a traitor?’ ‘From the period,’ replied he, ‘that you began to circumcise bramins

and destroy their temples.' He was put to death by being publicly dragged at the foot of an elephant.

Whether or not Wilks is telling everything truthfully, his narrative reveals a few things. One, throughout his rule Tipu employed Brahmin officers to control funds. Two, punishment for treachery was ruthless. Three, when, some years after Tipu's fall, Wilks was writing his account, Brahmins continued to resent the treachery charge: loyalty to Tipu was a value they still cherished. Four, it was in the British interest to stoke fires of enmity between Muslims and Brahmins. Five, intelligence was a key element in South India's end-eighteenth-century battles. And six, Purniah, working first with one side and then with the other, remained totally discreet with Wilks, a top-level imperial officer.

Travelling across Mysore a few months after Tipu's death, Francis Buchanan was told (he does not state by whom) that Tipu had once asked Purniah to become a Muslim. Apparently Purniah in response merely said, 'I am your slave,' and retired. Thereafter several persons, including Tipu's mother, 'a very respectable lady', told Tipu that he should leave Purniah alone. Pressure on him would 'throw everything into confusion'. Tipu 'very properly allowed the matter to rest'.

From the words quoted it appears likely that Purniah, on whom we know Buchanan had called in Srirangapatna, told the story himself. The 'very respectable lady' was someone who had known and understood Purniah for years.

~

Eight months after his retreat of May 1791, having secured his supply line for food and forage and strengthened also his network of spies, Cornwallis again attacked Srirangapatna from the east. As before, Abercromby advanced from the southwest. Once more joining the invasion were the Marathas, who had used the interregnum to gain territory in northern Mysore, as also the nizam's troops.

This time Tipu was unable to prevent a confluence of his numerous foes. Facing a massive army outside Srirangapatna, he responded with an unexpected shower of rockets which at first disconcerted the besieging soldiers, but a tight siege was

successfully enforced. To furnish timber for the siege, ‘the extensive and beautiful garden [in Bangalore] of Lalbaugh’, containing every kind of tree, ‘a princely nursery for the produce of Mysore’, had been cut down, Wilks would admit.

The ‘rockets were iron tubes a foot long and an inch in diameter filled with gunpowder and attached to [longer] bamboo rods… The tubes were aimed, lit and propelled to distances of up to a thousand yards like fiery arrows. These noisy missiles are said to have skittered and snaked along the ground, some bursting like bombshells, causing panic among the opponents’ cavalry.’

Releasing two of his English prisoners, Tipu sent with them a feeler for peace. The Treaty of Seringapatam that quickly emerged included a medieval element on which the British had insisted. Tipu was not only to give the confederates half his territory plus three crore and thirty lakh rupees as damages, he also had to hand over two of his sons to Cornwallis as hostages, to be returned when the damages were fully paid.

On 23 February 1792, Tipu assembled at his capital’s main mosque all the principal officers of his army and asked for their frank opinions, sealed by an oath on the Quran, on the peace terms demanded by the confederates. Wilks writes that ‘in aftertimes few of the members of that assembly could recite its events without tears’.

After Tipu had obtained assent to the terms, the boys were handed over on 26 February. In a solemn ceremony, the two sides exchanging gun salutes, Lord Cornwallis took possession of the Oriental princes, ten-year-old Abdul Khaliq and eight-year-old Moizuddin .

A Scotsman present, Robert Home, painted the scene for posterity. The boys were taken to the Company’s secure fort in Vellore, with Lieutenant Thomas Munro (the one who had called Tipu Britain’s first enemy in India) commanding the escort, and thence to Fort St George.

While the Marathas and the nizam obtained large tracts from Tipu’s domain, the East India Company absorbed Malabar in the west, Bellary and Anantapur in the north, and Salem and Dindigul in the south, attaching these rich districts to its Madras presidency. Tipu also lost Coorg, which became a Company dependency.

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Joseph Michaud, a Frenchman familiar with Srirangapatna both before and after Tipu's fall, would write:

> The city of Seringapatam had become one of the most important in Hindustan. The island on which it is situated is three miles and a half long and about a mile and a half broad. It rises to a great height in the middle of the river Cauvery and slopes rapidly to the bank. The fortress occupies a space of a thousand fathoms from the western extremity of the island. The river envelopes it on the north and on the west.

After the 1792 defeat, the capital was strengthened with ramparts, moats and entrenchments, Frenchmen assisting in the work. According to Michaud:

> In times of peace the city was very flourishing. Tippoo Sultan [kept] at his court the sons of the poligars as a pledge of their loyalty [*the medieval element again*]. This made [it] the residence of the most distinguished and the most wealthy families of Mysore and Canara… Gold-work, jewellery and watch-making made remarkable progress in the city …
>
> The population increased considerably under Hyder Ali and Tippoo Saheb. A large number of Frenchmen had settled down in the capital, the majority of whom remained there after its conquest by the English…engaged in mechanical trades such as watch-making and gold-work. The trade of a gun-smith was the most favoured of all by Tippoo Saheb.
>
> But only the Mussulman religion obtained great prominence and favour.

From notes compiled in the year 1800 by Francis Buchanan, the doctor-traveller, we receive additional pictures of Tipu's administration:

> The people universally accuse Tippoo of bigotry and vain glory; but they attribute most of their misery to the influence of his minister, Meer Saduc, a monster of avarice and cruelty. The Brahmans, who managed the whole of the revenue department, were so avaricious, so corrupt, and had shown such ingratitude to Hyder, that Tippoo would have entirely displaced them, if he could have done without their services; but that was impossible, for no other persons in the country had any knowledge of [the

revenue] business.

Mysoreans told Buchanan that instead of inspecting his Brahmin bureaucrats, or giving them attractive salaries, Tipu had 'appointed Muslim Asophs [asifs], Lord Lieutenants, to superintend large divisions of the country; and this greatly increased the evil'. These nobles took bribes from Brahmin bureaucrats, who in consequence demanded double the usual bribe from the people.

Of Srirangapatna, Buchanan would write:

> The palace at the Laul Baug possesses a considerable degree of elegance and is the handsomest native building that I have ever seen.

On the walls of another palace in the capital, Buchanan saw paintings requisitioned by Tipu, including one showing Haidar and Tipu in procession and another capturing the 1782 defeat of Colonel Baillie. Panels portrayed some of Mysore's ethnicities. An intriguing painting taken from one of these panels and published in Buchanan's book is of an unnamed Brahmin with his wife and son. The artist is not named either.

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A visit to Srirangapatna in January 2017 showed that the Lal Mahal palace admired by Buchanan had long gone, its damaged walls apparently demolished by the British in 1807. The ancient temple of Sri Ranganathaswami, evidently protected by Tipu, was newly painted and thick with devotees, while two similarly ancient temples stood right next to the site of Tipu's residence, one named after Siva in his form as Lord of the Ganga and the other after Narasimha, the half-man-half-lion incarnation of Vishnu.

In the palace with panels that Buchanan had visited (the 'Summer Palace' as it's now called) hang intact wall-portraits including those of Krishnaraja Wadiyar II, Mysore's titular ruler from 1734 to 1766, the period's Hindu rajas of Coorg, Chitradurga and Banaras, the Maratha Peshwa Balaji Baji Rao II, the Muslim Nawab of Arcot, and Kempe Gowda I, the Vijayanagara feudatory who had founded Bangalore in the sixteenth century.

A street now called Purniah (or Purnaiah) Street contained houses where, it seems, only Brahmins reside. Evidently during

Tipu's time, too, only Brahmins lived on this street. If, as seems possible, Purniah, too, resided there, it would have been a short carriage ride for him between home and Tipu's palace.

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In the six years of peace that followed his treaty with Cornwallis, Tipu fortified his capital, remounted his cavalry, enlarged and disciplined his infantry, suppressed refractory poligars, and encouraged cultivation. The heavy fine to the Company was paid and he recovered his sons. But the 1792 humiliation remained unavenged .

The Marathas, whose rise the British feared, were moving towards disintegration, even though one of their chieftains, Daulat Rao Sindhia, seemed to control Shah Alam II, the Mughal throne's feeble occupant. In Hyderabad, which also seemed disorganized, a group of Frenchmen used the peace to gain influence. Only Mysore looked efficient, even though it had lost half its territory and much of its treasure.

Worried by Mysore's energy, London clamoured in 1797 for a more expansionist India policy, and Richard Wellesley, the Earl of Mornington, an 'imperialist to the core' who disliked France and its radical Jacobins, was named Governor General.

Early that year, the port of Mangaluru, which had remained with Tipu, witnessed the landing of a small ship commanded by a Frenchman, François Ripaud. Calling himself a Jacobin and an officer in the French navy, Ripaud proceeded to Srirangapatna, where he told Tipu that 10,000 Frenchmen, led by an admiral and a general, had arrived on the Indian Ocean islands of Mauritius (then 'Isle of France') and Reunion (then 'Bourbon'); the French, added Ripaud, wanted Tipu to use this force and overthrow the British.

Perhaps because he was impatient for revenge, and perhaps also because, as Wilks would contend, he was a poor judge of people, Tipu bought the tale. In May 1797, Ripaud and his Jacobin comrades were publicly welcomed, in Tipu's presence, at a Srirangapatna event, where opposition was announced to all kings except Tipu, who was hailed as a 'citizen prince'.

Two officials were asked by Tipu to accompany Ripaud to Mauritius. Arriving in Port Louis on 19 January 1798, they were indeed welcomed by General Malartic, France's Governor General

for the two isles, but there was no sign of the 10,000 French fighters.

Unfazed, Tipu's men proposed in Port Louis a treaty with France whereby the French would provide to Tipu thousands of troops whose expenses he would bear, and, secondly, once all English troops were eliminated, territories in India would be equally divided between Tipu and the French.

On 30 January 1798, Malartic issued a proclamation saying that Tipu desired a treaty for expelling the British from India, and that Mysore would look after French fighting men (without, however, serving them wine). Enlisting in Tipu's service, several dozen Frenchmen accompanied Ripaud and the two Mysoreans onto a French frigate, *La Preneuse* , which brought the party back to the Malabar coast by end-April.

Tipu seemed to think that the British would not come to know of these public acts. But the Company's agents had not gone to sleep, and their freshly-named chief in India was eager to act.

On the very day when the French frigate landed in Mangaluru, Mornington, sailing from England, touched Madras. Arriving some days later in Calcutta, he received a report of the Port Louis proclamation, which was followed first by word from the British governor of the Cape of Good Hope that the report was authentic, and next by a ship captain's testimony before the Governor General that he was on shore at Port Louis when the proclamation was made.

Sharpening an unending Anglo–French rivalry, the year 1798 also saw the eastwards advance of Napoleon. In May, Napoleon was in Egypt. In July, he captured Cairo. But in August, the English navy defeated him in the Battle of the Nile.

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Reaching India, word of that last result injected confidence in the breasts of the new Governor General in Calcutta and his thirty-year-old younger brother, Colonel Arthur Wellesley, the future victor, in Waterloo, over Napoleon, who had arrived in India a year before his older brother.

The confidence was sorely needed. For through their spies the British had learnt that Napoleon had assured the radicals still in control in Paris that 'as soon as he had conquered Egypt, he will

establish relations with the Indian princes and, together with them, attack the English in their [Indian] possessions'.

To a friend, Rear Admiral Charles Magon, Napoleon had evidently exclaimed, 'That's it! It's in India that we must attack English power.'

And Charles Talleyrand, the French foreign minister, had claimed on 13 February 1798: 'Having occupied and fortified Egypt, we shall send a force of 15,000 men from Suez to India, to join the forces of Tipu-Sahib and drive away the English.'

Mornington quickly took military, diplomatic and political steps. Asking Madras and Bombay to quietly assemble forces on both coasts, he also sent Tipu long, stalling letters which betrayed no hint that he was aware of Tipu's Mauritius proclamation or of Napoleon's hopes.

The Governor General also turned his attention to Hyderabad, where, led by a Michel Raymond, 124 French officers, including radical Jacobins, exercised sway over the nizam's 14,000 soldiers. From Madras a force led by a Colonel Roberts was 'secretly but expeditiously dispatched to Hyderabad'.

Arriving there on 10 October, Roberts and his men obtained the surrender, twelve days later, of all the Frenchmen without firing a shot. Fortunately for the British, Raymond had suddenly died that year, before the surrender.

Not only did the nizam consent to this surrender; he agreed by treaty to keep in Hyderabad, at his expense, 6,000 artillery-backed English sepoys and in addition, pay the English an annual subsidy of over 14 lakhs! Why would the nizam not pay for protection from future foes and for the removal of Jacobin influence?

To seal the alliance, Mornington offered to protect the nizam from any new attack by the Marathas, at whose hands Hyderabad had suffered a large defeat in 1795, provided the French-trained army was disbanded.

Accepting the terms, the nizam became possibly the first 'major Indian power' that had 'definitely decided to trust to the British alliance and had for good or evil resolved to throw in his lot with theirs…and to heed their advice'.

While the 124 Frenchmen were sent to Europe as prisoners of war, the Governor General's brother, Arthur, was moved to Hyderabad to head British soldiers poised there for orders to march into Mysore.

To the west, in Poona, ‘a treaty was also formed with the Peshwah, the nominal head of the Marhatta empire, which secured the neutrality of that chief’. The peshwa’s rival, Daulat Rao Sindhia, who briefly thought of backing Tipu, was threatened that the British would finish him first. Mornington also neutralized the Danish settlement of Tranquebar, where Tipu had found French allies.

On 25 December 1798, Tipu’s response to two letters sent by Mornington in November reached Fort St George. Claiming that Mornington’s word of Napoleon’s defeat in the Nile battle had given him ‘more pleasure than can possibly be conveyed by writing’, Tipu went on to express his wish that ‘the French, who are of a crooked disposition, faithless, and the enemies of mankind, may be ever depressed and ruined’.

Knowing what he knew, these sentences from Tipu could not have impressed Mornington.

TIPU FALLS

The Fall of Seringapatam on 4 May 1799 was a huge imperial event, which even Napoleon’s later defeat in 1815 would not greatly eclipse. For years afterwards, British novelists (Walter Scott among them) and artists would pair the Corsican and the Mysorean. The siege preceding the fall, a participant, Alexander Beatson, would write, ‘has never been surpassed in splendor by any event recorded in the history of the military transactions of the British nation in India’.

By February, when Mornington ordered the attack, about 50,000 soldiers had been assembled to carry it out, mostly at Fort St George (about 350 miles from Srirangapatna) or near Mysore’s southern borders (about 130 miles from Tipu’s capital).

Headed by General George Harris, this army comprised the Company’s units from Madras, Bengal, and Bombay, a column from Hyderabad led by Arthur Wellesley, and another contingent sent by the nizam. About 4,000 of this force were white, all of them, apart from a few dozen Swiss mercenaries, British. The rest, a great majority, were native sepoys.

Accompanied by numerous elephants and camels and a vast army of bullocks, the soldiers trekked with big and small guns, batteries for breaching walls, and ladders for scaling them. The starvation that eight summers earlier had forced Cornwallis’s retreat

was not allowed to recur. Men and animals were fed throughout the long journey, and sustenance left over for enforcing the siege.

The marching mass included 'flocks of sheep and goats to provide meat for the officers, as well as hordes of camp followers and a travelling market selling food and drink for the soldiery'. Adds historian Richard Cavendish:

> Officers took along cooks, grooms, laundrymen and cleaning wallahs, and senior officers like Wellesley, who brought his silver-plated tableware with him, had thirty or more servants in their train. Moving ponderously in the burning heat, the army covered an area of eighteen square miles and on a good day managed to advance ten miles.

A colonial classic, the expedition reached Srirangapatna in the first week of April and placed the city under siege. Though inside the fortress Tipu had around 30,000 soldiers, the British had already won half the battle.

Worse for Tipu, the Kaveri that protected Srirangapatna was almost completely dry: men could walk or even run across it. To delay an attack in hopes of rain, Tipu sent messages to British commanders proposing talks, but the ruse was transparent and the offer spurned.

The spirit inside Tipu's capital was not great. Many residents saw Mir Sadiq, Tipu's chief dewan, as venal and extorting, some as a traitor. Purniah commanded a sizable unit (of over 4,000 men), as did Tipu's son Fateh Haidar and the officer called Qamaruddin Khan, but apart from waiting for an attack all they could do was to randomly fire cannons at a distant enemy.

On 5 April, the defenders succeeded in repelling a night assault, led by Arthur Wellesley, on a village called Sultanpettah. There were twenty-five British casualties; Wellesley himself was injured in the knee and almost captured. The next day, however, the village was easily taken by the British.

Reporting that 'the thunder of the artillery, English and Mysorean, was kept on in the quietness of the night from bank to bank with terrific noise; and the explosion of the mines spread a frightful light over the horizon', Michaud, the Frenchman, would refer to 'the sublime horror of this nightly spectacle'. In his view, 'Tippoo Saheb showed during the siege valour and bravery without parallel'.

If Harris waited much longer, his army's stores of food would deplete dangerously, but he wanted a reasonable opening in the fortress's walls before ordering his men to strike. On 28 April and again on 2 May, the attackers' batteries caused breaches in the fortress's walls. The second opening, which the nizam's soldiers had produced, was widened by fresh fire, and on the night of 3 May, Harris decided on storming through it the following day—'in the middle of the day, when the sun was high, and Tipu and his army were taking refreshment'.

David Baird, once a prisoner of Tipu (after the latter's 1782 win over Braithwaite) and now a major general, was asked by Harris to lead the assault. At 1 p.m. on the 4th, 'a dram of whisky and a biscuit were then issued to the European troops [Indians in the army were not entitled to this favour], before Baird drew his sword to signal the attack' .

Evidently 'cheers resounded along the trenches as the storming party dashed across the River Cauvery. Within 16 minutes, they had crossed the river…and…scaled the ramparts…under heavy fire from Tipu's batteries.'

A year later, in April 1800, an *enormous* canvas, 21 feet high and 120 feet long, portraying 'The Storming of Seringapatam' would open in London, done by a young artist called Robert Ker Porter, which Londoners would flock to see over the following nine months.

Many were killed in Srirangapatna that day, hundreds on the British side and thousands on Tipu's, for defence was defiant and brave, and attackers, too, were daring. Rioting by the victorious side took a fresh toll in the forty-eight hours that followed, while some men of Srirangapatna angrily killed Mir Sadiq. After the fall, in apparent confirmation of treachery, his estate received land in Hyderabad from the nizam.

Earlier that morning, when every portent seemed dark, Tipu had given gifts to Brahmin priests of his city's Vishnu temple and asked them to pray for him. In the afternoon, he frontally faced the rush of attackers and kept shooting from his horse. When he was hit himself, aides put him on a palanquin and tried to remove him, but an unidentified British soldier killed Tipu, more, perhaps, for his jewelled sword than in knowledge of who he was.

Tipu's body fell into a pile of other bodies. How it was identified was described in an 'Extract of a Letter from Camp at Seringapatam'

in the *Bombay Courier* of 24 August 1799:

> About dusk, General Baird, in consequence of information he had received at the Palace, came with lights to the gate, accompanied by the…Killadar of the fort and others, to search for the body of the Sultaun, and after much labour it was found and brought from under a heap of the slain to the inside of the gate .
>
> The countenance was no ways distorted, but had an expression of stern composure; his turban, jacket and sword-belt were gone, but the body was recognised by some of his people, who were there, to be Padshaw.
>
> An officer who was present, with leave of General Baird, took from his right arm the Talisman, which contained, sewed up in pieces of fine flowered silk, an amulet of a brittle metallic substance of the colour of silver, and some manuscripts in… Arabic and Persian characters [confirming]…the identity of the Sultaun's body.
>
> [The body] was placed on his own palanquin, and by General Baird's orders conveyed to the court of the Palace, where it remained during the night.

A Major Allan who also confronted Tipu's body on the evening of the 4th would write:

> When Tippoo was bought from under the gateway his eyes were open and the body was so warm, that for a few moments Col. Wellesley and myself were doubtful whether he was not alive; on feeling his pulse and heart all doubt was removed… His head was uncovered, his turban being lost in the confusion of his fall…
>
> He had an appearance of dignity or perhaps of sternness in his countenance, which denoted him above the common order of people.

Also near the scene was Alexander Beatson, whose accounts of Tipu's fall were among the earliest to circulate. According to him, 'The Sultaun had been shot, a little above the right ear, by a musquet ball, which lodged near the mouth, in his left cheek: he had also received three wounds, apparently with the bayonet, in his right side.'

* Tipu Sultan was a charismatic ruler of the kingdom of Mysore who succeeded his father, Haider Ali, to the throne. Tipu was born in 1750 and died in 1799. This extract is taken from *Modern South India* .

EIGHT

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THE LAST MUGHAL *

WILLIAM DALRYMPLE

The marriage procession of Prince Jawan Bakht left the Lahore Gate of the Red Fort at 2 a.m. on the hot summer night of 2 April 1852. With a salute from the cannon stationed on the ramparts, and an arc of fireworks and rockets fired aloft from the illuminated turrets of the Fort, the two gates opposite the great thoroughfare of Chandni Chowk swung open.

The first to emerge were the chobdars or mace-bearers. The people of Delhi have never much liked being restrained by barriers and were in the habit of breaking through the bamboo railings hung with lamps that illuminated the processional route. It was the job of the chobdars to clear a way through the excitable crowd, before the imperial elephants—always a little unpredictable in the presence of fireworks—appeared lumbering through the gates.

Two ministers of state on horseback began the procession proper. Shell ornaments were plaited into the horses' manes, and bells strung around their necks and fetlocks, and as they rode out, the ministers were attended by servants with punkahs (fans). Then came a troop of Mughal infantry, with polished black shields and curved swords, long lances and fluttering pennons of green and gold.

The first six of the imperial elephants followed, caparisoned with gold and saffron headcloths embroidered with the Emperor's coat of arms. From the howdahs, * officials held aloft the dynastic

insignia that had been used by the Mughals since their arrival in India more than three centuries earlier: from one, the face of a rayed sun; from another, two golden fish suspended at each end of a golden bow; from the third, the head of a lion-like beast; from the fourth, a golden Hand of Fatima; from the fifth, a horse's head; and from the last, a *chatri* or imperial umbrella. All were made of gold and were raised on gilt staffs from which trailed silken streamers.

There then emerged in turn a party of red-tunicked Palace servants carrying covered trays of food and gifts for the bride's family; a squadron of camels, with drums beating and guns firing in the air; a small regiment of British sepoys led by Captain Douglas, Commandant of the Palace Guards, all in tight-fitting busbees and blue-and-saffron uniforms, and escorting two light cannon; a troop of Skinner's Horse in their yellow tunics and scarlet sashes, topped by armoured breastplates and medieval-looking helmets; a group of bullock-drawn wagons on which sat several bands of Mughal kettle drummers, *shanai* players, trumpeters and cymbal clashers; and a European brougham carriage, painted kingfisher blue, containing a party of senior princes, their gilt brocade flashing in the light of the exploding fireworks.

After each group came parties of torchbearers, holding their flames aloft, interspersed with men holding candles in glass bell jars. There were also gangs of water carriers emptying their skins on to the road in an attempt to settle the billowing summer dust kicked up by the procession.

After the brougham there came a second, smaller group of younger princes, this time riding on horseback; and among them, in the very centre, rode the groom. Mirza Jawan Bakht was only eleven years old, a young bridegroom even in a society that tended to marry its offspring early in adolescence. Immediately behind the Prince swayed the elephant on which rode the Emperor himself, sitting in his golden howdah and decked out, despite the sweltering night heat, in his state robes and jewels, and attended by his personal bearer holding a peacock fan. The rest of the court followed behind on foot, a great snaking queue stretching back through Chatta Chowk, the Fort bazaar, to the Naqqar Khana Darwaza, or the Gate of the Drum House, in the very centre of the Fort.

Not long before this, the Emperor and Jawan Bakht had both sat for the Austrian artist, August Schoefft. The portrait of Zafar depicts

a dignified, reserved and rather beautiful old man with a fine aquiline nose and a carefully trimmed beard. Despite his height and surprisingly broad and muscular build, there is a profound gentleness and sensitivity in his large brown watery eyes with their unusually long lashes. As a teenage prince, Zafar had always appeared in his portraits as a slightly awkward and uncertain figure, plump, visibly ill at ease and thinly bearded. But as youth gave way to middle age he had grown into his looks, and in old age —unusually—looked finer than ever. Now in his mid-seventies, his cheeks were sallow, his nose more pronounced and his bearing more regal. Yet as the elderly monarch kneels, wearily fingering his beads, there remains in the expression of his dark eyes something unmistakably melancholic; in the set of his full lips there is still that air of sad, patient resignation visible in the earlier pictures. Schoefft shows Zafar a little swamped under the brocade cloth of gold which adorns him, somewhat weighed down by the huge blood-coloured rubies and the strings of vast pearls, each the size of a partridge egg, which seem to hang so heavily around his neck. It is a portrait of a man imprisoned by the trappings of his office.

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* Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal emperor, was born in Shahjahanabad (present-day Old Delhi) in 1775 and died in Rangoon (present-day Yangon) in 1862. This extract is taken from *The Last Mughal* .

* A howdah is the seat carried on an elephant's back; often in this period howdahs were covered with a canopy.

NINE

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RANJIT SINGH, MAHARAJA OF THE PUNJAB *

KHUSHWANT SINGH

A calligraphist who had spent many years making a copy of the Quran and had failed to get any of the Muslim princes of Hindustan to give him an adequate price for his labours turned up at Lahore to try and sell it to the foreign minister, Fakeer Azizuddin. The Fakeer praised the work but expressed his inability to pay for it. The discussion was overheard by Ranjit Singh, who summoned the calligraphist to his presence. The Maharaja respectfully pressed the holy book against his forehead and then scrutinized the writing with his single eye. He was impressed with the excellence of the work and bought the Quran for his private collection. Sometime later Fakeer Azizuddin asked him why he had paid such a high price for a book for which he, as a Sikh, would have no use. Ranjit Singh replied: 'God intended me to look upon all religions with one eye; that is why he took away the light from the other.'

The story is apocryphal. But it continues to be told by Punjabis to this day because it has the answer to the question why Ranjit Singh was able to unite Punjabi Mussalmans, Hindus and Sikhs and create the one and only independent kingdom in the history of the Punjab. Another anecdote, equally apocryphal and even more popular, illustrates the second reason why Ranjit Singh succeeded in the face of heavy odds: his single-minded pursuit of power. It is said that once his Muslim wife, Mohran, remarked on his ugliness—he was dark, pitted with smallpox, and blind of one eye ('exactly

like an old mouse with grey whiskers and one eye'—Emily Eden) —'Where was your Highness when God was distributing beauty?'

'I had gone to find myself a kingdom,' replied the monarch.

Ranjit Singh has been poorly served by his biographers. Hindu and Sikh admirers deified him as a virtuous man and a selfless patriot. This academic apotheosis reduced a full-blooded man and an astute politician to an anaemic saint and a simple-minded nationalist. Muslim historians were unduly harsh in describing him as an avaricious freebooter. English writers, who took their material largely from Muslim sources, portrayed him as a cunning man (the cliché often used is 'wily Oriental') devoid of moral considerations, whose only redeeming feature was his friendship with the English. They were not only not averse to picking up any gossip they could (every Oriental court has always been a whispering gallery of rumours) but also gave them currency by incorporating them in works of history. In recent years, monographs on different aspects of Ranjit Singh's government have been produced under the auspices of departments of history in some Indian universities. These are mostly catalogues of known facts put in chronological order without any attempt to explain them in terms of historical movements. This method of treatment makes the meteoric collapse of his kingdom appear as a freak of history instead of as the culmination of an important historical movement. Just as a tide seems deceptively still to those who watch it from the shore, so did the swift undercurrent of Punjabi nationalism pass unnoticed by people who did not fathom the depths beneath the swell on which the Sikhs led by Ranjit Singh rode to power. In the same way, the fall of the Sikh kingdom was not simply due to misfortune in the field of battle but, as a wave spends itself on the sands when its driving force is gone, it was the petering out of a movement whose life force was spent and which had lost its leader.

Ranjit Singh was neither a selfless patriot nor an avaricious freebooter. He was neither a model of virtue nor a lascivious sensualist. Above all, he was too warm and lively a character to have his life story told in a lifeless catalogue of facts, figures, and footnotes. As a political figure, Ranjit Singh was in every way as remarkable a man as his two famous contemporaries, Napoleon Bonaparte of France and Mohammed Ali of Egypt. He rose from the status of petty chieftain to become the most powerful Indian ruler of his time. He was the first Indian in a thousand years to stem the

tides of invasions from whence they had come across the northwest frontiers of Hindustan. Although he dispossessed hundreds of feudal landholders to consolidate his kingdom, he succeeded in winning their affections and converting them into faithful courtiers. In the history of the world, it would be hard to find another despot who never took life in cold blood yet built as large an empire as Ranjit's. He persuaded the turbulent Sikhs and Mussalmans of the Punjab to become the willing instruments of an expansionist policy that brought the Kashmiris and the Pathans of the Northwest Frontier under his subjection and extended his sphere of influence from the borders of China and Afghanistan in the north to the deserts of Sindh in the south. His success was undoubtedly due to his ability to arouse the nascent sense of nationalism amongst his people and make them conscious that more important than being Muslim, Hindu or Sikh was the fact of being Punjabi. His Sikh and Hindu troops subdued the Sikh and Hindu rajas of the Punjab. His Mussalman najibs rejected the appeals of their Hindustani, Afghan, and Pathan co-religionists to crusade against the 'infidel' and instead helped to liquidate the crusaders. The year Ranjit Singh died, it was his Muslim troops led by Colonel Sheikh Basawan that forced the Khyber Pass and carried Ranjit's colours through the streets of Kabul in the victory parade.

And a couple of years later Zorawar Singh, a Dogra Hindu, planted the Sikh flag in the heart of Tibet. These events were the high watermark of Punjabi imperialism which had carried Ranjit Singh to the heights of power and which subsided soon after his death.

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* Ranjit Singh, the greatest monarch of the Sikhs, was born in 1780 and died in 1839. This extract is taken from *Ranjit Singh: Maharaja of the Punjab* .

TEN

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MADHAVRAO SCINDIA *

VIR SANGHVI AND NAMITA BHANDARE

In any royal family, the birth of male heir to the throne is a major event. For the house of Scindia, troubled throughout its history by issues of adoption and succession, the arrival of a natural-born son was even more welcome.

On March 10, 1945, when Madhavrao Scindia was born in Bombay, the new arrival was a cause for both jubilation and celebration. Mithai was distributed in Bombay and Maharaja Jiwajirao arranged for a special train to take the new prince back to Gwalior.

The train steamed into the Jai Vilas Palace by the railway siding from Gwalior station. The palace and Gwalior Fort were lit up; gun salutes were fired; prisoners were released from jail; the poor were fed; poets wrote odes to the new crown prince; sweets were distributed to virtually the entire town; then there was a seemingly endless series of lunches and dinners at the palace.

Nobody who was in Gwalior that March will forget the rejoicing. Atal Bihari Vajpayee, a Gwalior native, remembers the sweets and the poems. Even the most sober observer of the festivities was moved to hyperbole by the air of celebration. C. Rajagopalachari, later to become India's first Governor General (but also the famous English translator of the *Ramayan*), compared the public jubilation to 'an age long gone by, in Ayodhya when Kausalya gave birth to Rama'.

Vajpayee's memories of the birth accord with those of many others: there were numerous official celebrations but what was most remarkable was the manner in which ordinary citizens rejoiced. Thousands of diyas were lit outside private residences, fireworks were set off and subjects flocked to the palace to felicitate their Maharaja on the birth of his heir.

In keeping with Scindia tradition, the Maharaja's sister—in this case, his first cousin, Asha Devi Phalke—was given the honour of formally naming the son.

The Scindias now had three children: Padma Raje, born in February 1942, who would remain her father's favourite child; Usha Raje, born a year later, and the crown prince, Madhavrao. The two youngest, both girls, Vasundhara Raje and Yashodhara Raje, would be born later.

But even as the celebrations were in progress, it was clear that the world itself was changing.

The Second World War was drawing to a close and most perceptive Indians recognized that the post-war phase would mark the beginning of the end of the British empire. It was as clear that the new India would not be dominated by the maharajas but would be run as an egalitarian, liberal democracy.

Many—if not most—princes watched these developments with an uneasy anticipation. They sensed that the honour and privileges that they had been brought up to regard as their due were now going to be taken away. Several of the princes actually preferred the British to the Congress politicians who would take over. And in virtually every royal court there was a deep disquiet about the emergence of the new India.

Jiwajirao was an exception to this trend. Unlike many of his fellow princes, he had never been prone to the excesses that characterized many Indian states. While some princes lived in a make-believe world where they pretended they were absolute rulers and thought nothing of spending small fortunes to marry off their favourite dogs, the Maharaja of Gwalior exercised both economy and discretion.

By the standards of his fellow princes, Jiwajirao was almost frugal. Except perhaps for his passion for horse racing, he had no major extravagances. Gwalior's revenues were actually spent on the welfare of the state and relatively little was wasted on pomp and splendour.

As a consequence, Gwalior was a financially sound state. When it finally merged into the Union of India, it contributed Rs 3.09 crore to the exchequer. But, astonishingly enough, Jiwajirao went much further than he needed to: he added an additional Rs 17 crore from his personal funds: money that had been painstakingly collected and saved by his father Madhav Maharaj and which now comprised the Gwalior Investment Fund and the Gangajali Fund.

Though he could have, Madhav Maharaj refused to draw on this fund for his own expenses. Instead he kept making generous contributions and overseeing the investments in an effort to swell the capital. By 1947, the income generated by the Gangajali Fund actually exceeded the total privy purses fixed for the rulers of all of the 25 states which would constitute the Madhya Bharat Union.

Though he was under no obligation to do so, Jiwajirao quite happily turned over all this money to the Indian exchequer.

The readiness to throw in his fortune was accompanied by a larger willingness to throw in his lot with the new India. While other maharajas dreamt of running independent states or of staving off the inevitable integration with the Indian Union, Jiwajirao looked forward to the new India.

In December 1946, several months before India became independent, Jiwajirao announced his support for a free and united India. He was the first among the rulers of the five 21-gun-salute states (Gwalior, Mysore, Kashmir, Baroda and Hyderabad) to agree to sign the Instrument of Accession (the announcement was made by the Diwan of Gwalior on behalf of the Maharaja). V. P. Menon, Secretary in the Ministry of States, who, along with Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, actually got the princes to accede to the new union, was to write later that Jiwajirao exercised ‘a healthy influence on several rulers’ in persuading them to accede.

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In 1945, when Madhavrao was born, Jiwajirao was already planning the transition into the new India. He recognized that his son’s life would be very different from his and was determined to bring him up differently.

And yet, because the Scindias were still maharajas and because it was not yet clear what role the princes would have in the new order, Madhavrao needed also to understand the Scindia traditions

and to learn to fit in with the culture of the palace.

Jiwajirao's own education had been pretty much the standard education afforded to princes in that era. He was educated privately under the guardianship of Humphrey Trevelyan and tutors were hired to teach him languages and such arts as music. As he grew older, Trevelyan sent him out on tours throughout the state so that he could get to know his kingdom and his subjects better.

Sensibly, Jiwajirao wanted none of that for Madhavrao. The tradition of that era was for maharajas to hire English nannies for their progeny—Jiwajirao hired an American, Norma Mackay. But this experiment didn't quite work. The governess never really fitted in with the Gwalior court and quickly departed. The task of looking after Madhavrao was then assigned to an old Scindia employee, Nurse Beatrice Barbara Castellino (hired in 1934), born in Byculla, Bombay, and a maid, Shantabai Nakhre. Once the Indians were firmly in charge of the crown prince, Jiwajirao made it clear that Madhavrao had to treat Marathi as his first language—it was, after all, the tongue of his ancestors from Kanerkheda. Nurse Castellino was told that she was to speak to Madhavrao only in Marathi.

The young prince was brought up in the nursery of Usha Kiran Palace (now a luxury hotel) along with his two sisters but he interacted constantly with a large extended family of cousins.

Meena Singh, Madhavrao's second cousin, who was very much a part of this extended family, remembers that their childhood was about as normal as could be expected under the circumstances. There was the odd elephant ride and occasionally a foreign dignitary would visit, but otherwise it was the usual kid stuff of darkroom, hide-and-seek (when the children would commandeer the lifts at Usha Kiran) and little skits and plays. Padma Raje, as the oldest daughter, was always the leader and would usually get her own way. Meena Singh remembers a kiddie home production of *Cinderella* . Naturally, Padma Raje got to play Cinderella. Madhavrao ended up as the humble coachman.

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It was an indication of how different a maharaja Jiwajirao was from his peers that one of his passions was the Scindia School.

Established in 1897 as the Sardar School to educate the sons of the sardars, the Gwalior aristocracy, the school was converted into

a public school by an English principal, F. G. Pearce, in 1933.

Pearce, a theosophist like his idol Annie Besant, was no imperialist and half the masters at the Scindia School wore khadi and were followers of Mahatma Gandhi. 'Jana Gana Mana' was sung regularly at the school since 1935, long before India won independence and Rabindranath Tagore's song became the national anthem.

There were few such schools in India during the 1930s; certainly there was no nationalist public school run by an Indian royal family. Recalls former minister K. Natwar Singh, who is an alumnus: 'It was a very unique school.' Jawaharlal Nehru's nephews, the sons of his sister Krishna Hutheesing, were sent there to study.

From Jiwajirao's point of view, a nationalistic boarding school was the perfect institution to prepare his son Madhavrao for the new India. There was only one problem: would a school named after the Scindias treat a Scindia crown prince like any other student?

Jiwajirao was determined to ensure that it did. He gave strict instructions that Madhavrao should get no special privileges. He would eat what the other students ate. He would sleep on the same simple wooden beds with cotton mattresses. He would wear the same uniform. He would not be allowed special visits from relatives. And so on.

To some extent it worked. Conditions at the school were spartan in those days and Madhavrao roughed it out like everybody else. For instance, there was no running hot water. The boys would line up, shivering in the early winter morning chill, to fill their buckets from a huge coal-lit burner. Madhavrao lined up with everybody else, even though at Usha Kiran he was used to a very different way of life.

Jiwajirao was so determined to ensure that Madhavrao received no special treatment that from time to time he would personally check what facilities his son was receiving. On one occasion Madhavrao went, along with a group of boys from the school, to Bombay to attend a National Cadet Corps (NCC) Navy Wing Camp. The camp was tough: there were tests of physical endurance, boat-pulling, swimming, etc. All was going well, till Jiwajirao dropped in unexpectedly .

He was pleased with his son's progress but then, suddenly, asked

to see Madhavrao's bed. While most boys had the regulation NCC coarse sheets and thin mattress, Madhavrao had a soft, thick mattress and expensive bed linen.

Jiwajirao was furious. Madhavrao tried explaining that these had been provided unasked for by the staff at Samudra Mahal, the Scindias' Bombay palace, but this did nothing to quell his father's anger. The mattress and linen were sent back to Samudra Mahal and the Maharaja insisted that his son be issued the regulation NCC bedding.

The 'surprise checks' also became a feature of Madhavrao's time at Scindia School. Jiwajirao would suddenly appear and conduct an on-the-spot inspection of the facilities being provided to his son. Usually, he came at mealtimes. This enabled him to check that his son was eating the same simple food as the other boys.

Did Jiwajirao's insistence that his son receive no special treatment work? On the whole, it seems to have but, of course, the servants at the school did go out of their way to ensure that the crown prince was well looked after.

Natwar Singh says he was told that Madhavrao's food was always served warm and that he never had to eat a cold chapati. 'He never sought or got any preferential treatment,' says Singh, 'but in a subtle way he was treated differently. I suppose it was inevitable.'

Friends and teachers remember Madhavrao as being a bright boy and an above-average student. Many were surprised by his determination: when he put his mind to something he usually did it well.

His career as a cricketer—he would continue to be passionately involved with the game throughout his life—grew out of his desire to be part of the Scindia School team. 'He was not outstanding at games,' remembers Shareef Ahmed, his English teacher and, later, cricket coach. 'He was not a natural sportsman but had made it to house teams.'

Ahmed told Madhavrao that he simply wasn't good enough to make it to the school team. Madhavrao's response was to begin practising like a boy possessed till, finally, Ahmed had to concede that he had made the grade.

He was selected for the team and eventually became opening batsman for Scindia School. 'He was fearless when facing a fast bowler,' recalls Ahmed.

In the summer of 1960, Madhavrao was due to take his school-leaving exam, the Senior Cambridge. While he had done well in most subjects, he had consistently failed in mathematics and science. His maths teacher had, in fact, written him off, convinced that he would fail both subjects.

Jiwajirao was not prepared to let that happen. He got in touch with another teacher at the school, G. K. Kapoor, who had never actually taught Madhavrao. His brief was simple: come to Bombay for the summer and tutor Madhavrao in maths and science.

Kapoor remembers the first day he went to Samudra Mahal. Conscious of Jiwajirao's desire to see his son pass both subjects, Kapoor was nervous. How could he successfully coach Madhavrao in maths and science when all the regular teachers had given up?

His trepidation increased when he was shown up to Madhavrao's room. No sooner were the pleasantries over than his student came to the point: 'l don't want to study maths or science.'

Kapoor saw his career as a teacher come crashing down before his eyes. 'I would have been the laughing stock of Scindia School if I had gone back as a failure,' he says now.

But he soon discovered two things. One: that if Jiwajirao wanted something done, Madhavrao had no choice but to comply. And two: that once Madhavrao actually applied his mind to something, he usually succeeded.

Kapoor's coaching technique was to get his student to answer questions from previous exam papers. As the days went by, he was pleasantly surprised to discover that Madhavrao was doing far better than he had dared to hope.

He conveyed this to Jiwajirao. 'Good,' said the Maharaja. 'Now you can start on science.'

And so, much to Madhavrao's irritation, he had to spend two hours on maths tuition in the morning and, then, another two hours for science in the afternoon.

But Kapoor was relieved to discover that Madhavrao managed to learn science just as he had forced himself to master maths.

And when the exam results were eventually declared, Madhavrao cleared both subjects and got a first division.

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Among the young Madhavrao's closest friends was a fellow student

at Scindia School, Balendu Shukla. Their friendship began inauspiciously. They were involved in a schoolboy skirmish; Balendu hit Madhavrao and reduced him to tears.

'Everyone told me my life at the school was over,' remembers Balendu. 'I had made the Maharaja's son cry.'

But he was not to know that even if Madhavrao *had* complained to his father, Jiwajirao would have refused to get involved. And, as it turned out, Madhavrao never even thought of complaining to P. B. L. Agnihotri, his housemaster.

Instead, he came up to Balendu a few days later just after asthachal—a period of introspection when all the boys at Scindia School gather together for a few minutes of silence just after sundown—and said that he wanted to be friends. They were, for life.

Balendu and Madhavrao became shikar buddies. In those days, hunting was a big part of the lives of most maharajas. The Gwalior forest was renowned for the size of its tigers and the Scindias maintained extensive tiger reserves. Ironically, though the maharajas and their guests would hunt and shoot tigers, the tiger population of Madhya Pradesh was much higher than it is today when all shikar is banned. Because the hunting grounds were reserved only for the princes, they were well looked after and poaching was virtually unheard of.

The Government of India would direct foreign visitors to one of the maharajas and ask for a tiger hunt to be arranged. For instance, Prince Philip and Queen Elizabeth were sent to Jaipur while Marshal Josip Broz Tito of Yugoslavia was sent to Gwalior to be Jiwajirao's guest. (Tito was keen to shoot a tiger but returned to Yugoslavia without fulfilling this ambition.)

Madhavrao always maintained that shikar had contributed greatly to the development of his character. 'It toughened me up,' he would tell friends, recalling the hunts of his youth. 'I would go out for days on end, sweat it out in the heat, sleep on the floor in hunting lodges in the middle of the jungle and eat whatever was available.'

He shot his first tiger when he was seventeen—a huge animal that now lies stuffed in the Scindia Museum at Jai Vilas Palace, each of its paws the size of a man's head.

Balendu has many memories of shoots and says that, contrary to the general view, the hunters were often in danger of being

seriously injured by their prey.

He recalls one close shave: 'We were sitting up on a machan, barely 12 feet high, not really expecting a tiger or a big cat. I saw a nilgai, fired a shot and hit it in the back. After a few minutes, while we were still up on the machan, Prabal [Madhavrao's ADC] spotted a tiger inching towards us. Bhaiya had a .375 double barrel and fired. He hit the tiger on the shoulder and the animal roared and jumped high in the air, towards us. Bhaiya fired a second shot but the gun didn't fire. Prabal handed over his gun and Bhaiya fired a third shot. But he still didn't hit the tiger. By now the tiger was only 15 feet away from us. Finally, Bhaiya fired again. This time he hit the tiger on its head. The tiger fell but it was still not dead. We had to fire yet again and then it finally died. When we came down from the machan, we were trembling at how close it had come to going badly wrong.'

In later life, Madhavrao would say that while he idolized Jiwajirao, the relationship they shared was more formal than close. Recalls Nurse Castellino, 'The father was very maharaja-like and formal.'

Each morning, all the Scindia children had to troop upstairs to touch their parents' feet. Propriety and formality were maintained in matters of address. Though Madhavrao was close to both his older sisters, he always addressed them formally: Akka Raje and Usha Raje. 'We were Vasu and Yasho,' says his youngest sister Yashodhara Raje of herself and her older sister Vasundhara Raje, 'but you simply had to address your elders correctly.'

In addition to the formality, there was also a lack of proximity. Jiwajirao wasn't around very much, having to divide his time between Gwalior, Bombay, Poona, and Delhi. In 1947, Jiwajirao was appointed Raj Pramukh of Madhya Bharat but once Madhya Pradesh was created in 1956, the office was abolished, leaving him with more time to travel outside of Gwalior.

His father had built the fabulous Samudra Mahal on the Worli seaface in Bombay and Jiwajirao took to spending more and more time there.

Built over 20 acres of land stretching from what is now Poonam Chambers to the high-rise building that is now called Samudra Mahal, the palace is probably the most fabulous private residence ever built in Bombay.

Jiwajirao loved Bombay and Samudra Mahal. And he also loved

the Bombay racecourse, which was virtually across the road from Samudra Mahal.

Many maharajas were fascinated by racing but Jiwajirao was more than fascinated: he was passionate about horses. He never bet on his own horses (even when they were favourites to win) and never made any money out of racing but followed the progress of his horses with an obsessive passion .

When one of his horses won—and this happened a lot—he would be elated and start handing out rewards to his staff. The first time a Scindia horse won the Derby, Jiwajirao took home a cash prize of Rs 75,000—a fortune in those days. But such was his excitement that the rewards and tips that he distributed on that day exceeded even the cash prize.

Like many horse owners, the Maharaja was superstitious. His dressing boy had strict instructions to note down which suit, shirt and tie he wore on a particular day—if it turned out to be a 'good' day for him (i.e., if his horse won), the 'lucky' clothes would be worn again.

This obsession with luck extended to people as well. The Maharaja's staff would avoid running into him just before he left for the races. They were worried that if his horses did badly that day they would be dubbed 'unlucky'. Fortunately, the Maharaja's horses usually won.

The racing season in Bombay began in November and extended to March. But for two months of the year (August and September), there would be races in Poona. And Jiwajirao and his staff would shift there.

The Scindias had a palace in Poona, built in the style of a Spanish villa by a well-known Italian architect. It was called Padma Vilas and was full of underground tunnels and secret doors that made it ideal for the Scindia children to play hide-and-seek and cops-and-robbers.

In 1949, Jiwajirao bought a 220-acre farm, located 10 kilometres from Poona, from Sir Sultan Chinoy. Called the Royal Stud Farm by Chinoy, the Scindias renamed it Manjri after the area where it was located and began breeding horses there.

Jiwajirao had earlier tried to breed horses in Gwalior but had found that the weather there was simply not amenable to breeding racers. But at Manjri the results were notably better and Jiwajirao was the first breeder to introduce Hyperion, or English, blood into

Indian horse racing .

~

When Jiwajirao was in Bombay, he spent much of his time with the jeweller Nanubhai Jhaveri, one of his closest friends.

The two had met soon after Jiwajirao's engagement. At that time, a commission to make ornaments for the new maharani was highly prized and virtually every jeweller in India had submitted designs for the Scindias to approve. Nanubhai wasn't in the top league of the jewellery business. He was going through a bad patch after his partners had thrown him out of the business. Though he was realistic enough to recognize that he stood no chance of getting the Scindia commission, he submitted some designs anyway.

To the amazement of the rest of the jewellery trade, Nanubhai got the commission. It wasn't his designs that made the difference; it was his personality. Jiwajirao took to him in an instant and forged a friendship that was to last throughout their lives. Nanubhai formed a new jewellery business—Nanubhai Jewellers, by appointment to His Highness, Maharaja Scindia—and never looked back again.

He remembered that lucky break and till his dying day in 1965, Nanubhai kept one of Jiwajirao's visiting cards on his dressing table. Each morning, before going to work, he would touch his forehead to the card. 'He never forgot the heart with which Jiwajirao had reposed so much trust and faith in him,' says his daughter, Nirja Nanubhai Kamani. Even today, many years after his death, a large portrait of Jiwajirao Scindia, painted by the noted artist K. K. Hebbar and commissioned by Nanubhai, takes pride of place in his daughter's drawing room at her home in Bombay.

It was Jiwajirao who arranged Nanubhai's marriage to the lovely Kamla Pittie. Mrs Pittie was unhappily married and Jiwajirao, who treated her like a sister (perhaps because she was also called Kamla, like his own sister), took it upon himself to find her a new husband. Though Nanubhai's mother initially opposed the match, the marriage went ahead at Jiwajirao's urging. And for as long as he lived, Kamla would tie a rakhi on Jiwajirao's wrist. She called Vijayaraje 'bhabhi', and when Nanubhai lay dying in London, Madhavrao went to meet him and ask Nirja if there was anything he could do to help.

~

In this day and age when people think nothing of jetting from one continent to another, Jiwajirao's travels may not seem unusual. But by the standards of that era, his regular trips to Bombay and Poona seemed like major undertakings.

Because Jiwajirao was the maharaja of Gwalior in an era when that still counted for a great deal, he could not travel alone or even with a few aides. A part of the Scindia court would travel with him.

For instance, when Jiwajirao came to Bombay for the racing season, he would fly from Gwalior in his state aircraft. But a vast army of staff would be dispatched to Bombay by road and rail. His personal aides would travel with him but senior officers would arrive separately.

No less than fifty cars would be sent from Gwalior containing provisions sufficient for four months. Typists, clerks, cooks, waiters, physicians, compounders, dressing boys, drivers, and even dog-boys to attend to the Maharaja's dogs were mobilized. All these people did duty at Samudra Mahal, which, in any case, had its own Bombay-based permanent staff.

Because Bombay came to represent such a large part of Jiwajirao's life, the children began spending more and more of their holidays there and became close to Jiwajirao's Bombay friends who, in turn, took it upon themselves to try and find things for the Scindia children to do.

Nanubhai introduced Madhavrao and his sister Usha Raje to Gabriella Frediani. Gabriella and her sister Patricia had recently moved to Bombay, when their father had been posted to India by his company, a shipping line called Lauro Lines. They became good friends with the Scindias and would often go riding together.

Gabriella remembers the teenage Madhavrao as being a lively, active boy who loved such outdoor pursuits as swimming and riding. She would spend long afternoons at Samudra Mahal with him listening to pop songs of that period such as 'If I had a hammer'.

He was, she remembers, full of mischief and always ready to tease his friends—especially if they were attractive young women.

One day, out of the blue, he asked the teenage Gabriella what the Italian word for grandmother was.

'Nonna,' she replied.

And from that day on, no matter how much she protested, that's what he always called her.

~

But, even though this was not widely known, Jiwajirao's health had begun failing. The diabetes that had killed his father had now returned to haunt him. He was no longer able to sit up and drive to Poona for the races and had to get the back seat of his Dodge converted to a bed, so he could lie down for the entire drive. Nurse Castellino moved from the nursery to look after the ailing Maharaja.

Despite his ill heath, Jiwajirao resolutely refused to write a will. When his legal adviser Kaka Tricomdas Dwarkadas of Kanga and Co. hesitantly made the suggestion, the Maharaja flared up: 'Does he think I am going to die so soon?' he complained. 'I don't care if after my death the government or someone else takes away my wealth. I will not write a will.'

In 1960, Padma Raje turned eighteen and Jiwajirao began looking around for a suitable bridegroom for his favourite child. By a strange quirk of fate, a proposal came from the royal house of Tripura. Jiwajirao was not enthusiastic about the proposed match. He felt that any alliance with Tripura would be inappropriate given that he himself had called off an engagement with Kamal Prabha Devi and that his own wife had nearly married the younger brother of the Maharaja, Durjay Kishore Dev, so many years ago. But Vijayaraje told him to let bygones be bygones. The match was a good one. Padma Raje would be the Maharani of Tripura.

And so, on March 6, 1960, Padma Raje married Kirit Vikram Bahadur of Tripura at Samudra Mahal. It was, predictably, a grand wedding. Every hotel room in Bombay was booked for the baraat and other guests; 10,000 invitation cards were sent out; the Tripura party arrived by special train and another special train was booked to take the bridal party back to Calcutta. For weeks on end, the fairy-tale wedding dominated all conversation in Bombay.

But this fairy tale did not have a happy ending. Jiwajirao's misgivings proved to be well founded; the match was ill fated. Four years and two daughters later, Padma Raje was found dead of an overdose of sleeping pills. Writes Vijayaraje in her autobiography: 'Her marriage had gone wrong and I knew she was intensely unhappy. My efforts to remind her that it was the duty of a good

Hindu wife to be understanding and submissive and to make the marriage a success had only resulted in her estrangement from me.'

There was only one consolation to be had: the father who had doted so much on her was no longer alive to witness the tragedy.

Jiwajirao's health had deteriorated even further after the exertions of his daughter's wedding. When he was informed that his mother Gajra Raje's chhatri (cenotaph) and statue were ready, Jiwajirao declared that he would perform the ceremony himself. But on the day of the unveiling, there was a minor mishap. Part of the chhatri gave way, causing a small fire. Jiwajirao was shaken and took this incident to be an omen. It suddenly struck him that his father, Madhav Maharaj, had died at the age of forty-five. And now, he himself was forty-four.

By this time Jiwajirao was almost completely blind in one eye. When he went next to Bombay, two physicians, Dr Jal Patel and Dr J. M. Rane, began calling on him every day. Another physician, Dr William Mann, was flown in from London but said that there was little he could do.

Once the doctors had more or less given up, the Gwalior court turned to astrologers and pandits. There were prayers and paaths and the astrologers made encouraging predictions.

On July 9, 1961, Jiwajirao turned forty-five, the age Madhav Maharaj had been when he died. From then on, things went downhill. Within a week he had slipped into a coma. On the night of July 16, with his wife chanting '*Krishna, Krishna* ' into his ear and his son's hand resting on his forehead, Jiwajirao battled for the last time with death. At 11.40 p.m., Dr Mann stepped forward to feel his pulse. There was none.

Jiwajirao's body was brought back to Gwalior by the state plane. His widow, his son, and his daughters travelled with the body. So did a courtier who would later play a crucial role in the Scindia story: Sardar Sambhajirao Angre.

As he lit his father's pyre, Madhavrao Scindia quietly came to terms with the fact that his life had changed forever. At sixteen, he was now the new Maharaja of Gwalior. The enormous heritage of his ancestors had suddenly fallen on his shoulders. He may have still been at school but he was now the head of the household, the new master of Jai Vilas and Samudra Mahal. He had three sisters to marry off and the expectations of the people of Gwalior to fulfil.

* Madhavrao Scindia belonged to the Scindia dynasty of Gwalior. As hereditary monarchies were abolished in independent India, he made a career for himself as a politician. He died young in a plane crash in 2001. This extract is taken from *Madhavrao Scindia: A Life* .

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Jadunath Sarkar (1870–1958) was an eminent historian of the Mughal dynasty. He taught English and later shifted to history at Patna College. Sarkar chose Aurangzeb as the object of his life's work. His first book, *India of Aurangzib,* was published in 1901. His five-volume *History of Aurangzib* took twenty-five years to complete and was published in 1924. Sarkar devoted another twenty-five years to his four-volume *Fall of the Mughal Empire* , completed in 1950. He is also the author of *Chaitanya: His Pilgrimages and Teachings* and *Shivaji and His Times* . Sarkar served as vice chancellor of the University of Calcutta and on the Bengal legislative council. He was knighted in 1929.

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